BRILL

ARABICA 66 (2019) 415-484

Arabica

brill.com/arab

The Ascent of Ishmael: Genealogy, Covenant, and Identity in Early Islam

Mohsen Goudarzi
University of Minnesota
goudarzi@umn.edu

Abstract

This essay argues that biblical genealogy serves as a fundamental organizing principle in the Qurʾān. In particular, the Qurʾān anchors the cultic and scriptural aspects of the Prophet's mission squarely on his community's descent from Abraham via Ishmael. The first part of the essay marshals qurʾānic evidence in support of this claim and critiques a number of recent studies that downplay or deny the significance of Abrahamic-Ishmaelite genealogy in the Qurʾān. The second part reinforces this significance by demonstrating that Ishmael's qurʾānic characterization as an upright prophet sharply contrasts with his predominantly negative portrayals in pre-Islamic writings. The final part shows that modern scholars initially acknowledged Abraham and Ishmael's key ancestral and cultic roles in the Qurʾān but came to see these roles as exclusively Medinan constructs. The essay challenge this view and offers a different explanation for the Qurʾān's varying portrayals of Abraham and Ishmael.

Keywords

Ishmael, Abraham, Qurʾān, early Islam, genealogy, universalism

Résumé

Cette étude soutient l'idée que la généalogie biblique est un principe fondamental et constitutif du Coran. Le Coran ancre en effet les aspects cultuels et scripturaires de la mission du prophète directement dans la descendance de sa communauté depuis Abraham via Ismaël. La première partie de cette étude réaffirme cette prétention à l'ascendance abrahamique et critique un certain nombre d'études récentes qui

 | DOI:10.1163/15700585-12341543

minimisent voire dénient l'importance de cette généalogique abrahamique via Ismaël dans le Coran. La deuxième partie de cet article démontre que la caractérisation d'Ismaël en tant que prophète contraste fortement avec ses représentations majoritairement négatives dans les écrits anté-islamiques. La dernière partie montre que les érudits modernes ont d'abord le rôle clef d'Abraham et Ismaël en tant qu'ancêtres et pour le culte dans le Coran, mais ont fini par considérer ces rôles comme des constructions exclusivement médinoises. Cette étude remet en question ce point de vue et offre une explication différente aux représentations d'Abraham et Ismaël dans le Coran.

Mots clefs

Ismaël, Abraham, Coran, débuts de l'Islam, généalogie, universalisme

1 Between Particularism and Universalism[1]

Muslims today constitute more than a quarter of the global population and hail from diverse national and ethnic backgrounds. This heterogeneity is not a modern phenomenon but has characterized Islam from its early history. Less than a century after the Prophet Muḥammad's demise, his creed was proclaimed by peoples living in the expanse of land from the Atlantic coast of North Africa to the Indus valley. In light of the rapidity of Islam's expansion and adoption by various peoples, it might seem natural to conclude that it was formulated as a universal venture from the very beginning. If the preaching of Muḥammad were aimed at a clearly delineated community, one might reason, it would not have appealed to vastly different societies from every corner of the world.

Certain passages of the Qurʾān are indeed amenable to such a universalist interpretation. For instance, the Qurʾān describes itself as "a reminder for

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor William Graham for his detailed comments on an early draft of this essay. I am also grateful to John Zaleski for productive discussions and suggestions as the essay was taking shape, and to Fred Donner, Sean Anthony, Khalil Andani, and Mehdy Shaddel for reading the final draft of this paper and offering feedback. I presented parts of this essay at "The First Millennium: Religion in Late Antiquity" workshop at the University of Minnesota's History Department; I would like to thank Andrea Sterk for this opportunity and audience members for their suggestions and questions. Finally, I wish to thank *Arabica*'s anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the Qurʾān are mine but they often take into account renditions of A.J. Arberry, Richard Bell, and Ali Quli Qarai.

the worlds" (*ḏikrun li-l-ʿālamīn; e.g.* Kor 38, 87) and the Prophet as "a mercy for the worlds" (*raḥmatan li-l-ʿālamīn*; Kor 21, 107). As I shall point out in detail below, however, many qurʾānic texts emphasize or assume the contextual specificity of the Prophet's mission and message. In particular, several qurʾānic passages characterize the Prophet and his followers as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, envisaging this descent as vital to Islam's rites and revelations. An especially significant text in this regard is Kor 2, 125-130, which portrays Abraham and Ishmael as founders of the Meccan sanctuary and its rituals. In addition to associating the Kaʿba with Abraham and Ishmael, this text portrays them as having asked God to send a messenger to "their descendants" (*ḏurriyyatinā*) who would teach them "the book and wisdom" (*al-kitāb wa-l-ḥikma*). The prophecy of Muḥammad and the revelation of the Qurʾān are thereby conceived as the realization of this patriarchal prayer. The clear implication is that the Prophet's followers owe their sanctuary and scripture to their Abrahamic descent. The Abrahamic pedigree of the first Muslims is not only assumed and emphasized in the Qurʾān, it is also central to how they are characterized in some of the earliest Christian and Jewish writings about the rise of Islam—a point that will also be elaborated on in this essay. Notwithstanding the Qurʾān's universalist inclinations, therefore, it appears that both its first adherents and outside observers conceptualized Muḥammad's movement as a venture of Ishmael's children.

1.1 *The Sway of Universalism*

Such evident emphases on genealogy in the Qurʾān and the earliest non-Muslim writings are sidelined in a number of recent monographs, which tend to characterize Islam as a movement with universal aspirations. A particularly influential voice in this regard has been Fred Donner, who argues that Muḥammad's movement was open to all righteous monotheists regardless of their ethnic or confessional backgrounds.[2] That this movement originated in Arabia was merely a "historical accident."[3] That its founding document calls itself an *Arabic* Qurʾān (*e.g.* Kor 12, 2) is no more than a "linguistic designation."[4] Indeed, Donner maintains that the Qurʾān could not have been addressed to Arabs as a distinct, well-defined community, as there was no coherent

2 Donner had presented his interpretation of Islam's origins as early as 1994 and published it in "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *Al-Abhath*, 50-51 (2002-2003), p. 9-53, before developing his hypotheses more fully in a 2010 monograph (cited in the next note).

3 Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the origins of Islam*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 210.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Arab political identity in the early seventh century CE.[5] In emphatic terms, Donner asserts that the Islamic scripture does not "advance, or even hint at, any kind of collective identity other than that of the Believers—an identity based squarely in faith and righteous action, not in ethnic or 'national' or even cultural affiliation."[6] Dubbing incipient Islam as "the Believers' movement," Donner maintains that it was a fellowship of faith, not centred on ethnic or national solidarity.

According to Donner, the Believers' movement was singularly focused on monotheism and the impending Last Day as well as righteous conduct, as a result of which it was open not only to various ethnic groups but also to the like-minded adherents of other religious traditions: Muḥammad and his followers were happy to admit within their ranks Jews, Christians, and even Zoroastrians[7]—as long as members of these communities could prove their monotheistic and pietistic mettle. Thus, the earliest believers did not see themselves as establishing a new confession but as leading a movement that aimed to bring all monotheists together. Accordingly, the believers had universal ambitions, embarking on conquest to establish "the hegemony of God's law over the whole world."[8] Donner suggests that Islam's eventual transformation into a distinct, exclusive religion owes much to the policies of the Umayyad Empire, in particular the initiatives undertaken by the administration of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65/685-86/705).

A similar interpretation of early Islam is found in Peter Webb's *Imagining the Arabs*, a bold study that revisits the development and consolidation of "Arab" as an ethnic category. Webb's chief contention is that the emergence of an overarching Arab identity for various Arabian groups was not a pre-Islamic affair but in fact a byproduct of the conquest of the Middle East and the formation of an Islamic empire.[9] He thereby agrees with Donner (and earlier scholars such as D.H. Müller) that a strong Arab identity did not exist in the early seventh century CE, providing a powerful and richly detailed defence of this position. If there were no self-styled Arabs at the time of the Prophet, naturally

5 *Ibid.*, p. 218 ff. According to Donner, Arabian conquerors developed a coherent Arab identity only later, mostly during Umayyad times (*ibid.*, p. 219).

6 *Ibid.*, p. 218 ff.

7 Donner believes that even Zoroastrians "may have been integrated in some way with the community of Believers" (*ibid.*, p. 110 ff).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

9 "Islam was thus not created by Arabs, but rather a sense of Arabness emerged from the particular shape of […] Marwanid Islam articulated in the later first/seventh century." Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 139.

the Qurʾān could not have been addressed to such a collectivity. According to Webb, the audience of the Qurʾān was socially fragmented, consisting of "Ma'addites, Kindites, Christians, Jews and others who did not listen to revelation with pre-existing notions of kin-interrelation."[10] Indeed, Webb claims that the Qurʾān deliberately avoided the imposition of "ethnic restrictions on membership" in order to facilitate the growth of the community of believers.[11]

If there was no swelling sense of Arab solidarity before Islam, could the earliest Muslims have attained social cohesion through biblical genealogy, in particular by considering Abraham and Ishmael as their common progenitor? Webb dismisses this possibility. In his discussion of Abraham, Webb underlines the fact that Abraham is not termed an Arab in the Qurʾān but rather a *ḥanīf*, which Webb takes to mean a person of "upright religion" or "true religion."[12] That the Qurʾān invokes Abraham to legitimize Muḥammad's preaching is because the latter is "Abraham's *successor*"[13]—a phrase that pointedly avoids characterizing Muḥammad as a descendant of Abraham. Later, Webb discusses the idea of Arabs, or at least the tribes of northern and central Arabia, as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. He claims, however, that this idea is not rooted in the Qurʾān, adding that the Islamic scripture does not use the adjective *ʿarabī* in relation to Ishmael.[14] Indeed, Webb contends that the Qurʾān "does not connect Ishmael to Muhammad in terms of blood."[15] According to Webb, Arabian Muslims came to see themselves as descendants of Ishmael and Hagar only "in the early second/eighth century."[16] Therefore, not only did the Prophet's addressees *not* imagine themselves as Arabs, they also did not consider themselves to be descendants of Abraham and Ishmael.

In claiming that the Qurʾān was not addressed to a specific ethnicity or even an otherwise "cohesive, unified population,"[17] Webb echoes Donner by underlining the importance of monotheism as the binding element and singular focus of the Prophet's followers. Accordingly, he draws attention to the term *ḥanīf* as a key qurʾānic concept, one that signifies "pure monotheism" and characterizes Abraham's creed—and, by extension, the Prophet's teachings.[18] In the same vein, Webb claims that the term *mu'min* perhaps "had overly broad

10 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
13 *Ibid.*; emphasis added.
14 *Ibid.*, p. 212.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 236, n. 147. For more on this question, see below.
16 *Ibid.*, p. 170, n. 119.
17 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

connotations of monotheist believers,"[19] and asserts that the early residents of the *amṣār* belonged to a "puritanical *hijra* community with its emphasis on shared monotheism and nominal equality between believers."[20] He is thus amenable (if not committed) to Donner's characterization of the believers' movement as an ecumenical community inclusive of Jews and Christians.[21] Finally, Webb offers a universalist reading of the Qurʾān's worldview by describing it as "a religious creed with a militarized outlook that exhorted expansion."[22] After all, if early Islam was meant to promote monotheism for all, there is no reason why its adherents should have imagined a limited geographic horizon for their venture.

To appreciate the sway of universalist readings of Islam's origins, it is instructive to review the work of another leading scholar of early Islam, namely, Robert Hoyland's *In God's Path*. To be sure, there are a number of ways in which Hoyland consciously distances himself from Donner's approach. For example, whereas Donner considers ideology to be the prime mover behind the formation and expansion of the early Islamic polity, Hoyland maintains that questions of "power and identity" should be given equal attention.[23] In this vein, he prefers to speak of "Arab conquests" instead of "Islamic conquests," noting that contemporary witnesses described the conquering armies "in ethnic rather than religious terms."[24] Moreover, Hoyland casts doubt on the idea that the Prophet harboured global ambitions from the beginning. According to Hoyland, "Muhammad's target audience […] was, *initially at least*, the Arabic speakers of his own region."[25] As for the later aims of the Prophet, Hoyland suspends judgement, though he notes that the early conquests are not necessarily evidence of interest in global domination. The conquests may have been "an autocatalytic process,"[26] that is to say, a limited initial undertaking that unintentionally snowballed into a large-scale enterprise.

Notwithstanding the differences of opinion between Donner and Hoyland, their analyses converge in fundamental ways. For one, Hoyland provides a similarly bare-bones reading of the Prophet's preaching, characterizing it

19 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
20 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
21 *Ibid.*, p. 169-170, n. 116.
22 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
23 Robert Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press ("Ancient Warfare and Civilization"), 2015, p. 5.
24 *Ibid.* Hoyland cautions, however, that "we are not talking about a nationalist endeavor nor an immutable racial category" (*ibid.*).
25 *Ibid.*, p. 38; emphasis added.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

as a message of adherence to pure monotheism and righteousness.[27] Even this second component seems to function as a stand-in for monotheism, because elsewhere Hoyland translates *mušrikūn* both as "pagans" and "the unrighteous."[28] With this effective reduction of the qurʾānic preaching to the idea of monotheism, Hoyland also adopts the notion that monotheists of various confessions could become integral members of the Prophet's community. Like Donner, Hoyland bases this conclusion primarily on the so-called "Constitution of Medina," a pact of alliance that the Prophet is said to have concluded with various groups residing in the Yaṯrib. According to Hoyland, this pact suggests that the *muʾminūn*—a term that the Qurʾān uses in reference to the Prophet's followers—consisted not only of Muslims but also of "Jews, along with possibly a few Christians and monotheists of other hues."[29] The Prophet's community, in other words, was "pluralist by nature."[30] Similar to Donner, Hoyland believes that the Prophet's followers maintained this pluralistic character for a few decades after his death.[31]

Because Hoyland views the Prophet's followers primarily as a group of committed monotheists dedicated to waging war against pagans, he tends to assign a secondary significance to their particular ethnic or genealogical identities. Thus, like Donner he believes that the term *muʾmin* in the Qurʾān is "mostly used in a very general way," that is to say, devoid of discernible socio-ethnic connotations.[32] Accordingly, even though Hoyland makes a number of observations that seem inconsistent with a universalist outlook on the part of early Muslims, in each case he downplays their significance. For example, unlike Donner and Webb he notes that the Qurʾān presents Abraham as the ancestor of the Prophet's followers,[33] but adds later that "neither the Qurʾān nor Muhammad had put up any bar" for the conversion of other (non-Abrahamic)

---

27 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
28 *Ibid.*, p. 57, 197.
29 *Ibid.*, p. 57; see also p. 135. Hoyland had proposed this interpretation two decades earlier in "Sebeos, the Jews and the Rise of Islam," in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald L. Nettler, Luxembourg, Harwood ("Studies in Muslim-Jewish relations", 2), 1995, p. 89-102, esp. p. 95. In suggesting that the Prophet's core followers ("Believers") consisted of Muslims as well as Jews, Hoyland was inspired by *Hagarism*'s characterization of early Islam as "Judeo-Hagarism" and Uri Rubin's interpretation of the Constitution. Uri Rubin, "The 'Constitution of Medina': Some Notes," *Studia Islamica*, 62 (1985), p. 5-23, esp. p. 12-17. See below for more on *Hagarism*.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
31 *Ibid.*, p. 57 ff.
32 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
33 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

peoples to Islam.[34] Hoyland also mentions that in the early period non-Arabs had to become clients (sg. *mawlā*) to an Arab patron in order to convert to Islam. While this may suggest that the Prophet's Arabian followers considered themselves to be the primary intended recipients of his teachings, Hoyland describes the precondition of clientage as a mere "snag" and believes that it simply reflected the fact that "Arabs initially thought along tribal lines."[35] Later, Hoyland refers to certain "hints that the Arabs favoured a genealogical restriction" to conversion and the participation of the conquered peoples in the society of conquerors, citing in this regard the prohibition of marriage between Arabs and non-Arabs.[36] However, he adds that such a policy was not viable in the long term as it had no evident support in the Qurʾān or the example of the Prophet. At one point, Hoyland even wonders if "the caliphs before [ʿAbd al-Malik] thought that Islam was only meant for the conquerors, not for the conquered."[37] However, he does not dwell on this possibility or the indications to this effect. Overall, while Hoyland provides an incisive discussion of a variety of material and socio-cultural factors that may have motivated and aided the conquests, he does not seem to believe that such factors were embedded in the religious ideology of the Prophet and his followers.

The analyses of Donner, Webb, and Hoyland differ in important respects, but they share key features that bear recapitulation. In particular, they paint a strikingly minimalist reading of the Qurʾān's message, effectively reducing it to pure monotheism in a relatively abstract sense. The resulting narrative effects a reverse kenosis, as it were, an emptying out of the qurʾānic preaching from its specific human context in favour of transcendental and divine ideas. This minimalist and abstract portrayal facilitates the conception that the first generation of Muslims (or "believers") included monotheists of various persuasions, that they saw their revelation as a universal message, that they were zealous to fight paganism and sinfulness the world over, and that they harboured the ambition of global domination. Even Hoyland, who dedicates considerable attention to the particular context of the Qurʾān's original promulgation, does not see such contextual factors as an integral element of the qurʾānic worldview itself, and thereby remains open to a universalist reading of the Prophet's later declarations.

While the surveyed studies claim that ethnic or genealogical considerations are largely absent from the Qurʾān, Angelika Neuwirth contends that the

34 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
35 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
36 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
37 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Qurʾān explicitly theorizes the irrelevance of physical genealogy. According to Neuwirth, the Qurʾān attempted to challenge the core values of pagan society by rejecting attachment to kinship-based collectivities and promoting instead the value of spiritual bonds. In particular, Neuwirth focuses on the story of Abraham as a key conduit for the articulation of a unique qurʾānic perspective on this subject. Noting that the Prophet's followers were increasingly ostracized from their own families and communities, Neuwirth claims that these circumstances explain why qurʾānic texts dwelled on Abraham's altercations with his father and thereby attributed to Abraham the "rejection of the genealogically based principle of clan loyalty, *nasab*."[38] In Neuwirth's view, after his departure the qurʾānic Abraham "establishes a new genealogy grounded in a spiritual *Leitfigur* (leading figure), that is, God, thereby undermining genetic bonds."[39] That is to say, Abraham attains the status of a "spiritual role model" for those who similarly devote themselves to God.[40] Indeed, Neuwirth asserts that by focusing on Abraham and reflecting on biblical history in general, the Qurʾān meant to foster "bonds to God's earlier prophets," who came to serve as "*spiritual* forefathers" of the Prophet's community.[41] Neuwirth thus claims that the qurʾānic conception of lineage (*ḏurriyya*) came to signal not so much physical descent but rather "a covenantal bond among the elect."[42] The Qurʾān, in short, constructed "a prophetic lineage that all pious believers can claim as their spiritual ancestry."[43] Thanks to this spiritual lineage, the Prophet's religion was "*universal* and grounded *exclusively in personal piety*."[44]

38 Angelika Neuwirth, "From Tribal Genealogy to Divine Covenant: Qur'anic Re-figurations of Pagan Arab Ideals Based on Biblical Models," in *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text*, Oxford, Oxford University Press ("Qur'anic Studies Series", 10), 2014, p. 53-75, at p. 62.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 70; emphasis added.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 73; emphasis added. A similar reading of the Qurʾān is offered in Reuven Firestone, "Is there a notion of 'divine election' in the Qurʾān?," in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in its historical context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds, London, Routledge ("Routledge Studies in the Qurʾān"), 2011, p. 393-410. Firestone underlines "earlier messengers and prophets" as objects of God's election (p. 401), asserts that the qurʾānic notion of covenant is "separated from kinship" (p. 409), characterizes Muslims as a faith community ("a new religious community of believers," p. 410), and makes only one passing reference to the Abrahamic ancestry of the Prophet's followers (while discussing Kor 22, 78, on p. 400). Firestone does not mention Ishmael at all.

1.2 *Demarginalizing Genealogy*

The surveyed studies make many insightful contributions to our understanding of the Qurʾān and Islam's emergence. However, they downplay the significance of genealogy in the Qurʾān by overlooking or misreading its pertinent proclamations. As the central figures behind the Qurʾān's genealogical logic are Abraham and Ishmael, it is instructive to examine how these studies describe the function of these two figures in the Qurʾān. Donner makes no mention of Ishmael and provides only a few references to Abraham. He notes, for example, that "Muslim tradition" (*i.e.* not the Qurʾān?) considers Abraham to be the founder of the Kaʿba and its rituals.[45] Donner also briefly comments on the qurʾānic description of Abraham as a *ḥanīf* and a *muslim* (in Kor 3, 67)—which he takes to be near synonymous terms that signify devotion to monotheism.[46] However, Donner does *not* mention that Abraham is considered the ancestor of the Prophet and his followers in the Qurʾān.

In contrast to Donner, Hoyland notes the qurʾānic depiction of Abraham as a forefather of Muḥammad and his community.[47] However, this observation is decidedly marginal to Hoyland's description of the Qurʾān's preaching. When discussing the conversion of non-Arabs to Islam, for example, Hoyland refers to Kor 2, 127-8 only in an endnote. As noted before, Kor 2, 127-8 (and indeed Kor 2, 124-134 more broadly) is a crucial text that recounts how Abraham and Ishmael asked God to make "a community submissive to [Him]" (*ummatan muslimatan laka*) from among their descendants. Hoyland admits that "[t]here is a hint of a genealogical qualifier to being a Muslim here,"[48] but adds that this condition is "too remote and vague" to have been enforced in practice after the conquest of the Middle East.[49] In another endnote, Hoyland draws a parallel between the importance of Abraham in the Qurʾān and his significance in the Christian tradition, writing that "Late Antique Christians also thought that their faith 'took its beginning from Abraham, the first of the fathers.'"[50] Because Abraham's fatherhood is understood in an incorporeal spiritual sense in Christianity, Hoyland's comparison suggests that the qurʾānic link between Abraham and Muḥammad may also be conceived in a primarily incorporeal manner—a suggestion that reorients the significance of qurʾānic references to Abraham away from physical descent and towards spiritual association.

45 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 49, 66.
46 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
47 Hoyland, *In God's Path*, p. 37.
48 *Ibid.*, p. 268, n. 18.
49 *Ibid.*, p. 268-269, n. 18.
50 *Ibid.*, p. 266, n. 31, quoting Simeon of Bet Arsham, a Syrian bishop active in the early sixth-century.

Like Hoyland, Webb's only reference to the key passage of al-Baqara (Kor 2, 124-134) appears in an endnote. In the corresponding text in the main body, Webb discusses the notion that Arabs are descended from Ishmael, arguing that this notion is post-qurʾānic.[51] Then, only halfway through the mentioned endnote, Webb refers to Kor 2, 124-34 and translates a part of Kor 2, 128, according to which Abraham and Ishmael prayed that God might "make *our descendants* into a community [*umma*] devoted to You."[52] While the verse explicitly casts the Prophet and his followers as the progeny of Ishmael and Abraham, Webb attempts to evade this genealogical connection by the following remarks:

> The 'community' is not about genealogy, however, it is based on faith: an *umma muslima*, and the following verses (Q 2:129-134) continue the story of a righteous *belief community* from Abraham to Jacob, ending with 'That community passed away [*khalat*]. What they earned belongs to them, and what you earn belongs to you: you will not be answerable for their deeds'. The Qurʾān thus closes the matter with reference to their passing [*khalat*]—a typical device in its treatment of analogies drawn from the past. Accordingly, the Qurʾān *does not connect Ishmael to Muhammad in terms of blood* (and never Arabness, either), but instead *invites a symbolic connection through faith*.[53]

Webb thus rejects the idea that the Prophet and his followers may have considered Abraham and Ishmael as their ancestors.

Webb's attempt to dismiss the genealogical import of Kor 2, 124-134 is untenable. It is true that Abraham and Ishmael ask God for "a community submitting to [Him]" (*ummatan muslimatan laka*). However, this community is to be drawn from the ranks of *their descendants* (*min ḏurriyyatinā*). Thus, the concern of Abraham and Ishmael for the faith of this community does *not* negate its genealogical constitution. In fact, as far as the qurʾānic text is concerned, the *only* reason Abraham and Ishmael care about the religious character of this community is because it represents their own posterity. Presumably in order to mitigate his departure from the express tenor of the patriarchs' prayer, Webb draws attention to the following verses, noting that they continue "the story of a righteous belief community from Abraham to Jacob, ending with 'That community passed away [*khalat*]'."[54] Highlighting the temporal gap between

51 Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, p. 212.
52 *Ibid.*, p. 236, n. 147; emphasis added.
53 *Ibid.*; emphases added.
54 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

that community and the Prophet's followers, Webb claims that the Qurʾān posits merely "a symbolic connection through faith" between Ishmael and Muḥammad, that is to say, *not* a genealogical connection.[55]

Yet Webb's analysis of the broader context of Abraham and Ishmael's supplication is similarly problematic. To begin, the fact that the patriarchs—Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob—represent a community that has "passed away" by no means negates the claimed descent of Muḥammad's community from Ishmael. It simply means that the patriarchs are *distant* progenitors of the Prophet's people, and that their (righteous) conduct is not accounted to their descendants (cf. Kor 52, 21).[56] Moreover, the patriarchal generation is not just "a righteous belief community," by which Webb presumably means a non-genealogical group. It is a tight-knit family, as the passage under consideration makes amply clear. For instance, after describing Abraham's submission to God, the text notes that "Abraham enjoined *his sons*" to similarly submit to God, telling them that "God has chosen the religion [of submission to Him alone] *for you*" (Kor 2, 132). This statement clearly indicates that monotheistic worship stands in a special association with Abraham's children—not with humankind as a whole. Following Abraham's example, the dying Jacob also asks "*his sons*" what they shall worship after him, to which they respond that "we shall worship your God, the God of *your fathers* Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac" (Kor 2, 133). It is difficult to imagine a sharper focus on genealogy than what is found in these verses.

The lineal focus of this passage is also clearly adumbrated at its outset. Prior to the supplication of Abraham and Ishmael, the text refers to Abraham's success in overcoming certain tribulations, after which he is made an example/paragon (*imām*) for people.[57] Having received this distinction, Abraham's very first question is whether his status will be extended to his descendants (*ḏurriyyatī*), to which God answers that "My covenant shall not extend to the wrongdoers" (Kor 2, 124). Therefore, neither Abraham nor Ishmael nor Jacob

55 *Ibid.*

56 As pointed out already by Heinrich Speyer, here the Qurʾān may be rejecting the doctrine of the *Zeḵot Avot* (the "merit of the fathers"), namely, the idea that the virtues of the Patriarchs (and perhaps ancestors in general) positively affect the fate of the Jewish people. Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1961², p. 183-184.

57 In the Genesis narratives, the notion of "test" appears only in the story of Isaac's near sacrifice in Genesis 22, but as early as *Jubilees* we find the idea that Abraham underwent a number of tests—including the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and the binding of Isaac. See Jon Douglas Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton, Princeton University Press ("Library of Jewish Ideas"), 2012, p. 92.

exhibit a universalist interest in the formation of purely faith-based groups, but rather show concern about the spiritual wellbeing of their own progeny. What is at stake, in other words, is who *among Abraham's descendants* is worthy of inheriting his mantle of exemplary righteousness, and who will be excluded on account of wrongdoing. Therefore, when the following verses assert that Abraham and the patriarchs were neither Jews nor Christians but rather *muslim*s (Kor 2, 135 and 140), they imply that Jews and Christians—the two branches of the Israelites in the qurʾānic conception (on which see the next paragraph)—have generally gone astray and that the Ishmaelites can lay better claim to the religious legacy of their forefathers. What we witness in these verses is a family dispute between Ishmaelites and Israelites, not a theoretical debate on monotheistic principles for a global audience.[58]

To better appreciate the vital role of genealogy in the sura al-Baqara (2), it is important to recognize that the Qurʾān depicts not only Jews but also Christians as Israelites. For one, the qurʾānic Jesus does not have a universal mandate towards Jews and Gentiles alike, but functions as "a messenger to the Children of Israel" (Kor 3, 49). That is why he proclaims, "O Children of Israel, I am God's messenger to you, confirming the Torah before me" (Kor 61, 6). The Qurʾān accordingly describes the division between Jews and Christians as an intra-Israelite matter, noting that "a party of the Children of Israel believed [in Jesus] while another party disbelieved" (Kor 61, 14). Even in rebuking contemporary Christians who attribute divinity to Jesus, the Qurʾān relates that "the Messiah said: 'O Children of Israel, worship God, [who is] my Lord and yours'" (Kor 5, 72). There is no qurʾānic statement positing a broader scope for the message of Jesus. That Christians are counted as Israelites is also suggested by the fact that al-Baqara, immediately before discussing Abraham, refers respectively to "Jews and Christians," "those to whom We gave the *kitāb*," and "the Children of Israel" in succession (Kor 2, 120-122), implying that these labels have the same import.[59]

---

58 Another key qurʾānic verse that clearly describes Abraham as the "father" (*abīkum*) of the Prophet's community is Kor 22, 78, which Webb similarly cites only in an endnote (p. 160, n. 35), but this time without any discussion. In the pertinent paragraph in the main body of the text, Webb claims that the Qurʾān casts the Prophet as "Abraham's successor." Webb, *Imagining Arabs*, p. 116.

59 For the idea of Christians as Israelites, see my dissertation, *The Second Coming of the Book: Rethinking Qurʾānic Scripturology and Prophetology*, PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2018, p. 331-335. A number of previous studies have pointed out the qurʾānic characterization of Christians as Israelites, often in the context of arguing for a Jewish-Christian input to the Qurʾān (an unnecessary assumption, in my view). See Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, New York, Bloch Publishing Co., 1933, p. 38; Shlomo Pines, "Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity," *Jerusalem Studies in*

The genealogical thinking embedded in al-Baqara, as well as its explicit references to "fathers" (*ābāʾ*) and "sons" (*banūn*) in the context of discussing the progeny (*ḏurriyya*) of Abraham, illustrate why it is incorrect to claim, as Neuwirth does, that the "Biblicising concept of 'progeny' enables the Qurʾān to get around the standard discourse on sons (*banūn*) and forefathers (*abāʾ* [*sic*]), both of which constituted the backbone of the pagan power paradigm at this time."[60] The Qurʾān does not negate the significance of blood ties but simply warns against prioritizing them over devotion to God. In my view, Neuwirth's comments on al-Baqara's portrayal of Abraham are similarly inaccurate. Her first comment pertains to Kor 2, 124, where (as noted above) Abraham asks whether his exemplary status will be transferred to his descendants, to which God responds that "My covenant shall not extend to the wrongdoers." According to Neuwirth, the divine response means that Abraham's exemplary status is denied to his descendants.[61] However, the qurʾānic text underlines the exclusion of evildoers, not Abraham's progeny as a whole.[62] What is rejected is the *automatic conferral* of Abraham's status to his descendants regardless of their spiritual credentials.

In addition, the broader context of Kor 2, 124 (and in particular the following verses) shows that the Qurʾān is challenging the perceived privileges of the Israelites *not* by putting forward a universalist perspective but by underlining the promise of Ishmael's descendants. Unfortunately, Neuwirth discusses these later verses (in particular Kor 2, 127-129) separately, which obscures their connection with Kor 2, 124. In any case, she provides a translation of Kor 2, 127-129, which describes the foundation of the Kaʿba by Abraham and Ishmael and their prayer for a submitting community from their descendants. However, she does not dwell on the genealogical significance of this prayer. Instead, Neuwirth focuses on the potential pre-Islamic intertexts of Abraham

Arabic and Islam, 4 (1984), p. 135-152, at p. 135-138; Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān (Part One)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 74/2 (2015), p. 225-253, esp. p. 229-235; and Holger Zellentin, "Judaeo-Christian Legal Culture and the Qurʾān: The Case of Ritual Slaughter and the Consumption of Animal Blood," in *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam*, ed. Francisco del Río Sánchez, Turnhout, Brepols ("Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme", 13), 2018, p. 117-159, at p. 148.

60 Neuwirth, "From Tribal Genealogy to Divine Covenant," p. 63.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

62 Mariana Klar thus provides a more plausible interpretation of this response: "the privilege granted Abraham by God is expressly denied to those of his descendants who are wrongdoers." Mariana Klar, "Through the Lens of the Adam Narrative: A Re-consideration of *Sūrat al-Baqara*," *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies*, 17/2 (2015), p. 24-46, at p. 34. Speyer similarly understands the exclusion to be directed at "die ungläubige Nachkommenschaft Ibrāhīms." Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, p. 182.

and Ishmael's cooperation in the building of the Meccan sanctuary. Moreover, even though she describes Ishmael as "the Arabs' tribal forefather,"[63] she adds that "Ishmael's genealogy is not of theological importance in the Qur'ān."[64] Her other attempts to downplay the significance of genealogy are similarly unconvincing. For instance, she claims that Kor 33, 7-8 represents a departure from a genealogical conception of chosenness in favour of "a prophetic lineage that all pious believers can claim as their spiritual ancestry."[65] Yet, the prophetic lineage of this text—which mentions God's compact with the prophets and names explicitly Muḥammad, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—also represents a physical lineage. In particular, the Qur'ān considers Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad not only as descendants of Noah (the second father of humanity) but also as children of Abraham. As another Medinan sura puts it, God "sent Noah and Abraham and established prophecy and *al-kitāb* among their descendants" (Kor 57, 26). Neuwirth's depiction of physical and spiritual relationships as antithetical is therefore not consistent with the indications of the qur'ānic text.[66]

1.3 *The Importance of Being Abrahamic*

So far, I have criticized the analyses of Webb and Neuwirth, showing that they downplay the genealogical significance of Abraham and Ishmael in al-Baqara. It is helpful at this stage to assess the significance of the pertinent section of al-Baqara independently. The first point to make is that, *pace* Hoyland, this passage is not "remote."[67] Indeed, what we may call the "Abraham segment" of al-Baqara is central to this sura from a textual and conceptual standpoint. Al-Baqara begins with a prologue (Kor 2, 1-29) that comments on matters of belief. This section is followed by the story of Adam and Eve's Fall (Kor 2, 30-39), which in turn gives way to a long discourse with and about the Israelites that enumerates some of God's favours to them as well as their failures of

63 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

64 Neuwirth, "From Tribal Genealogy to Divine Covenant," p. 69.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

66 Another issue on which Neuwirth posits departure from genealogical thinking is the subject of charity. She claims that the Qur'ān "introduced a new canon of values in which the stranger and the disadvantaged—not one's kith or kinsman who garnered prestige by tribal association—were seen to be the primary addressees of charity." Neuwirth, "From Tribal Genealogy," p. 58. However, the qur'ānic emphasis on charity highlights kin in particular, as it repeatedly places *ḏū l-qurbā* ("kinsmen") at the head of several lists that enumerate the recipients of one's generosity (*e.g.* Kor 4, 8; 17, 26). Indeed, the sura al-Balad, which Neuwirth quotes on the same page, urges attention towards *yatīman ḏā maqraba* (which she translates as "an orphan near of kin").

67 Hoyland, *In God's Path*, p. 269, n. 18.

faith and obedience (Kor 2, 40-123). The Abraham segment (Kor 2, 124-141) immediately follows this section about the Israelites. The remainder of the sura, comprising its second half, focuses primarily on the Prophet's community (Kor 2, 142-284).[68] It provides extensive legislation and interlaces its commandments with criticism of Jews and Christians as well as brief historical reflections. The sura ends with a short epilogue that mentions articles of faith and relates a humble prayer of the faithful before their Lord (Kor 2, 284-286). Textually speaking, therefore, the Abraham segment is nestled at the centre of al-Baqara, representing a transition from historical reflection to issues of immediate contemporary relevance.[69]

A broad analysis of al-Baqara similarly establishes the conceptual centrality of the Abraham segment. This can be gleaned from examining the major theme of the sura, which is arguably the idea of covenant. The story of Adam and Eve relates how God accorded them an exalted status and settled them in the Garden, only for them to violate His one condition and therefore be banished. The subsequent discourse with the Israelites uses similar terminology to paint an analogous picture: God chose the Children of Israel and showered them with material and spiritual favours, yet they have been ungrateful and have repeatedly flouted their covenantal obligations. The second half of the sura, on the other hand, focuses on the future. Changing the direction of prayer (*qibla*)—reportedly from Jerusalem to the Meccan sanctuary—it heralds the

68 As pointed out by Neal Robinson, it is noteworthy that the numerical center of the sura (*i.e.* Kor 2, 143) describes the Prophet's followers as "a middle nation" (*ummatan wasaṭan*). Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A contemporary approach to a veiled text*, London, SCM Press, 1996, p. 201.

69 Of course, this division is not meant to suggest that there are sharp borders between the proposed segments. The sura is ultimately a continuous text and can be divided in various ways. For other structural analyses of al-Baqara, see Mustansir Mir, "The *sūra* as a unity: A twentieth century development in Qur'ān exegesis," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, eds Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, London, Routledge ("Routledge/SOAS Series on Contemporary Politics and Culture in the Middle East"), 1993, p. 211-224; Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān*, p. 201-223; Mathias Zahniser, "Major Transitions and Thematic Borders in Two Long Sūras: *al-Baqara* and *al-Nisā'*," in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, ed. Issa J. Boullata, Richmond, Curzon Press ("Curzon Studies in the Qur'ān"), 2000, p. 26-55; Raymond Farrin, "Surat al-Baqara: A Structural Analysis," *The Muslim World*, 100 (2010), p. 17-32; and Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's style, narrative structure, and running themes*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press ("Advancing Studies in Religion", 1), 2017. For a detailed comparison of the divisions proposed by Robinson, Zahniser, Farrin, and Reda, as well as an insightful discussion about the potential pitfalls of over-reliance on structural outlines, see Mariana Klar, "Text-Critical Approaches to Sura Structure: Combining Synchronicity with Diachronicity in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*. Part One," *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies*, 19/1 (2017), p. 1-38, esp. p. 4-16.

formation of Muḥammad's followers as a separate community from Jews and Christians. The heavy dose of legislation that follows is a corollary of this independent status: if they are to become God's new elect, the Prophet's community must demonstrate their ironclad commitment to divine commandments. Is God thereby entering a new covenant with the Prophet's followers, just as He formerly did with the Israelites? It is precisely here that the significance of the Abraham segment becomes apparent.

It must first be noted that the figure of Abraham disrupts the chronological progression of al-Baqara. His presence means that the sura moves from the story of Adam and Eve to that of the Israelites, then backtracks and reflects on Abraham and his sons and grandsons, only to move forward again and address the Prophet's nascent community. The Abraham segment not only reverses the temporal movement of the first two historical sections but also breaks their sombre mould: while the first humans and the Israelites fail to obey God's orders, Abraham successfully overcomes his trials, after which he is appointed an *imām* (*i.e.* a paragon, leader) for people. Abraham immediately asks whether this standing will be extended to his progeny, to which God responds that "My covenant shall not extend to the wrongdoers" (Kor 2, 124). That this is not a rejection of Abraham's descendants *in toto* is evident in the following verses, which paint a harmonic and blissful (one might even say Edenic) image of Abraham's family: Ishmael helps his father build a sanctuary to God and purify it for monotheistic worship, Abraham urges his sons to remain submitted to God (*muslimūn*), and Jacob's similar appeal to his own sons is met by their resolute affirmation: "We shall worship your God and the God of your fathers Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac. One God! And we shall submit to Him alone" (Kor 2, 133). The Abraham segment therefore depicts not only Abraham but all the Patriarchs (including Jacob's sons) as exemplary individuals possessing an exceptional religious endowment.

Considering its place and contents, the *raison d'être* of the Abraham segment seems rather clear: since the Israelites have generally failed their forefathers, the Prophet's followers may be better positioned to inherit the patriarchal endowment. The sura's unfavourable assessment of the Israelites emerges not only from its earlier historical reflections but from the Abraham segment itself, which pointedly reminds the hearers that "Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Patriarchs (*al-asbāṭ*)" were neither Jews nor Christians (Kor 2, 135 and 140). This means that Jews and Christians—both of whom the Qur'ān considers as subdivisions of Israel—cannot lay exclusive claim to the patriarchs. If the repeated wrongdoings of the Israelites (Kor 2, 54, 57 and 59) have imperiled their participation in the Abrahamic covenant, now there is hope that this covenant can be continued more successfully in Abraham's remaining children, that is to

say, Ishmaelites.[70] This is why the Abraham segment highlights the Ishmaelite ancestry of the Prophet and his community by casting Muḥammad's mission as the fulfilment of the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael for the creation of "a community submitting to [God]" from their descendants (*min ḏurriyyatinā*). The legitimacy and promise of this new community is thereby anchored squarely in its descent from Abraham and its resulting capacity to inherit the Patriarch's exemplary status.

The Abraham segment of al-Baqara is thus vital to what is arguably the primary goal of this sura, namely, burnishing the credentials of the Prophet's followers as an independent community distinct from Jews and Christians. The importance of this sura's references to Abraham becomes clearer when we recognize that it contains the Qurʾān's most extensive and programmatic declaration of the formation of the Muslim community. It is therefore of utmost importance that, genealogically speaking, the sura does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is to say, notwithstanding the failings of the Israelites, the sura does not abandon the principle of genealogical election. Instead of providing an allegorical or typological understanding of Israel's chosen status—as we find in the New Testament[71]—the Qurʾān holds out hope for another group of Abraham's descendants, namely, the Ishmaelites. Another qurʾānic passage (Kor 22, 78) similarly underscores the Abrahamic ancestry of the Prophet's followers in the context of discussing their election:

> Strive in God's way as is His due. *It is He who chose you* and laid no hardship for you in religion, [which is naught but] *the creed of your father Abraham*. It is He who named you Muslims aforetime and in this [era/revelation], so that the Messenger shall be a witness over you, and you shall be witnesses over [other] people.[72]

The Prophet's followers, in other words, must appreciate finding favour in God's eyes, and must, furthermore, recognize that their attendant commitments are nothing out of the ordinary but their ancestral heritage. This genealogical emphasis does not necessarily close the door to non-Abrahamic peoples, for Abraham's descendants should strive to be *imām*s for others—for instance, like Abraham and Ishmael (Kor 2, 125), they must facilitate worship of the one

70 As Charles Torrey put it, "Allah had selected, once for all, the family of Abraham. Israel (which for Mohammed of course included the Christians) had had its day, and it was now the turn of Ishmael." Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, p. 59.

71 See, for example, *Epistle to the Romans* 2, 28-29: "a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal."

72 Italics mine.

God for all. But the distinction of Abraham's Ishmaelite descendants stands: the Prophet of God is one of them, the *kitāb* of God is sent down in their own language and addressed primarily to them, and their sanctuary becomes the centre of pilgrimage for other communities.

1.4 *Bringing the Believers Back to Earth*

The effective reduction of the Prophet's preaching to monotheism and righteousness in the studies of Donner, Hoyland, and Webb facilitates an ecumenical and universal understanding of early Islam. After all, if Muḥammad's followers were occupied primarily with monotheism, they should have embraced all adherents of this principle regardless of their confessional or ethnic backgrounds. However, Muḥammad's preaching not only promoted submission to the One God but also demanded commitment to an extensive set of scriptural injunctions. *Inter alia*, this is evident in the above-quoted prayer of Abraham and Ishmael, where they hope not only that their descendants form "a community submitting to [God]" (*ummatan muslimatan laka*) but also beseech God to send a messenger to this community who would "teach them the Book and wisdom" (Kor 2, 129).[73] By emphasizing the scriptural aspect of Muḥammad's mission, the Qurʾān dismisses the notion that Israelites have monopoly over divine revelation. In the post-Temple era when the Abrahamic promise of land and numerous descendants might have seemed out of reach, the Jews had prided themselves on the Torah, their portable inheritance and treasure house of law and wisdom. As I shall discuss below, a rabbinic tradition celebrates this exclusive possession by discussing why other nations were not worthy of the Torah. Ishmaelites had not qualified because of their irresistible proclivity towards theft ("the very essence of these people, like their father, is *banditry*").[74] Muḥammad's reception of the Qurʾān was a forceful rebuttal of such conceptions and a living proof that, as Abraham's children, Ishmaelites were as entitled to divine scripture as their Israelite cousins.

Indeed, as I argue elsewhere, genealogy is integral to the Qurʾān's conception of scriptural history.[75] The genealogical underpinnings of qurʾānic scripturology emerge clearly when we recognize that the Qurʾān, in its discourse on revelations, endows the term *kitāb* (book) with the connotation of

73 This is practically the Prophet's mission statement, repeated three other times in the Qurʾān (Kor 2, 151; 3, 164; 62, 2).

74 *Sifre* to Deuteronomy (*pisqa* 343), discussed below. My quotations from *Sifre* are taken from Marty Jaffee's online translation (available at https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/book/sifre-devarim), with occasional modification of the line arrangements for sake of better readability.

75 Goudarzi, *The Second Coming of the Book*, p. 327-330.

"comprehensiveness" and accordingly applies this term only to the Torah and the Qurʾān—which the Muslim scripture considers as the only paradigmatic revelations, the only documents with extensive historical and legal content. That there are two *kitāb*s, furthermore, is because of the effective bifurcation of Abraham's descendants, who are the primary recipients of this exceptional gift (Kor 57, 26). The first *kitāb* was sent down long ago, through Moses, to the Israelites (Kor 32, 23; 40, 53), who are therefore the *ahl al-kitāb par excellence*. As for the Qurʾān, it is the second comprehensive scripture, "a *kitāb* sent down after Moses" (Kor 46, 30). Delivered in the Arabic language, the Qurʾān is given primarily for the benefit of the Ishmaelites (as made clear in the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael), while also offering the Israelites a final chance by addressing their many disagreements over the first *kitāb* (Kor 27, 76; 41, 45). Going far beyond advocacy for monotheistic worship, therefore, the Prophet's mission involved the deliverance of comprehensive guidance to Abraham's long-forgotten descendants. The genealogical rationale of the Prophet's scriptural function challenges the narrative of early Islam as an ecumenical and universal monotheistic movement from early on.

That the Qurʾān designates the Prophet's followers as "those who have believed" (*allaḏīna āmanū*) and "the believers" (*al-muʾminūn*) does not mean that he led a pan-monotheistic movement including Jews and Christians in its core constituency. According to the Qurʾān, prophets are sent to specific nations, often their own nations (Kor 10, 74; 30, 47). In this vein, the Prophet was sent to his own community—"a people whose fathers were not warned" (Kor 36, 6)—and his qurʾānic revelations constituted "a reminder for you and your people" (Kor 43, 44). Moreover, in the Qurʾān's presentation, prophetic missions result in the division of the recipient community into believers and non-believers. Having preached to his own people (*qawm*), for example, Šuʿayb enumerates two camps among them: "a party" (*ṭāʾifa*) who believed (*āmanū*) in his message and another who did not believe (*lam yuʾminū*; Kor 7, 87; cf. Kor 11, 36). When used as proper designations in the contemporary context, therefore, "those who have believed" and "the believers" refer to those *from among the Prophet's own people* who answered his call and embraced monotheism, thereby renouncing their pagan past.

Naturally, the Prophet's followers had no monopoly over faith in God, so the Qurʾān uses *allaḏīna āmanū* and *muʾminūn* (as well as their singular forms) in reference to the righteous members of other nations—in particular, the followers of previous prophets as well as some contemporary Jews and Christians (Kor 3, 110; 10, 103; 11, 86; 28, 10; 40, 28). However, precisely because the Qurʾān considers Jews and Christians as Israelites and hence as belonging to another nation, its attribution of sincere belief to some of them does not make the

latter into followers of the Prophet and hence believers in the proper sense of the term.

The social barrier between the Prophet's followers on the one hand and believing Jews and Christians on the other hand is evident in qurʾānic passages that confirm the salvific prospects of anyone who "believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness" regardless of whether they are of "those who have believed, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans" (Kor 2, 62; 5, 69). It was thus possible for a Jew or a Christian to "believe in God and the Last Day" without being counted among "those who have believed." Even Jews and Christians who acknowledged Muḥammad as a God-sent messenger did not automatically enter the ranks of the Prophet's followers but remained outsiders. Accordingly, instead of describing such individuals as new members of the community of believers, the Qurʾān considers them as forming a righteous faction within their own societies. For example, one qurʾānic text urges the People of the Book to abide by "the Torah, the Gospel, and what is sent down to them from their Lord"—this last item an apparent reference to the Qurʾān—adding that "among them is a just group (*umma*), though many of them do evil" (Kor 5, 65-66). Another verse promises redemption to those Jews and Christians who would "believe in [Muḥammad], honour him, help him, and follow the light that is sent down with him," proceeding to acknowledge that such individuals do exist: "*Among the people of Moses* is a group (*umma*) who guide by the truth and incline towards it" (Kor 7, 159). In other words, even proactive support for the Prophet was not envisioned as turning Jews and Christians into members of the Prophet's own community (see also Kor 3, 113; 4, 162; 5, 82-4; 46, 10; 74, 31).

It would therefore be mistaken to take the Prophet's alliance with certain Jewish groups, as recorded in the so-called "Constitution of Medina," as evidence that he counted these groups among his followers. While this pact describes allied Jewish groups as forming "a community with the believers" (*umma maʿa l-muʾminīn*),[76] this does not mean that such Jews were "part of the *umma* or community of Believers."[77] What the text indicates is that these Jews joined hands with the believers to form a larger coalition, not that the Jews were a subset of the believers. This interpretation is corroborated by the preceding line in the pact, which obligates Jewish parties to share the

76 Robert Bertram Serjeant, "The *Sunnah Jāmiʿah*, Pacts with the Yat͟hrib Jews, and the Taḥrīm of Yat͟hrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-called 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 41/1 (1978), p. 1-42, at p. 26.

77 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 73.

financial burden of war "with the believers" (*maʿa l-muʾminīn*), an expression that envisages the Jews and Believers as two separate groups.[78] It was only later, when the genealogical orientation of Islam gradually diminished, when its confessional contours took shape, and when it was seen to surpass previous dispensations, that full membership of Jews and Christians in the community of Believers/Muslims became a possibility, a reality, and indeed the desired course of action for all.[79]

To recognize that Jews and Christians were *not* integral members of the community of believers (at least as depicted in the Qurʾān) is not to claim that Islam was a distinct religion from the beginning. By the Qurʾān's account, the operative forces of past and present are specific human communities, not abstract entities such as "religions." In this vein, it is telling that there is not a single qurʾānic reference to Judaism (*yahūdiyya*) or Christianity (*naṣrāniyya*) *per se*, while there are numerous references to "Jews," "Christians," "the Children of Israel," and "the People of the Book." As for the term *dīn*, its common translation as "religion" (also adopted in this paper) should not be taken to mean that it signifies the post-Enlightenment concept of religion in all its complexity. It is possible, for instance, that *dīn* in the Qurʾān refers primarily to rites of worship—in particular cultic prayer and sacrifice—instead of covering all the intellectual and practical aspects of the Prophet's preaching. Judging by the Qurʾān, Muḥammad's mission had two main dimensions: 1) insistence on monotheism, which entailed opposition to prayers and offerings made to lesser deities, by emphasizing *inter alia* the Abrahamic pedigree of the Meccan sanctuary; and 2) endowing Muḥammad's followers with a scripture containing revealed wisdom and laws, in part by underlining the Mosaic precedent of such a document. Neither of these dimensions implies that the Prophet envisioned himself as the founder of a new religion or even that he viewed Jews and Christians as practicing two separate religions. But equally, neither

78 Serjeant, "The *Sunnah Jāmiʿah*," p. 26; the same expression appears again (*ibid.*, p. 35). These lines suggest that the variant *umma min al-muʾminīn*, reported in some versions of the pact recorded in Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām's (d. 224/838) *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, should be discarded. For a discussion of this particular clause and references to earlier scholarship, see Michael Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina": Muḥammad's first legal document*, Princeton, The Darwin Press ("Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam", 23), 2004, p. 139-147. Lecker prefers the reading *amana min al-muʾminīn*, which would signify that the Jews had a security guarantee from the Believers.

79 For a similar critique of Donner's hypothesis, see Nicolai Sinai, "The Unknown Known: Some Groundwork for Interpreting the Medinan Qurʾān," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, 66 (2015-2016), p. 47-96, esp. p. 76-80. Note, however, that Sinai's insightful discussion does not dwell on the genealogical underpinnings of the Qurʾān's representation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

dimension means that Muḥammad led a movement open to all monotheists and committed to global hegemony.

1.5 *The Qurʾān's Embrace of Ishmael*

If al-Baqara's Abraham segment was the only place in the Qurʾān to feature Ishmael, it would still be sufficient to establish him as a critical figure in the qurʾānic depiction of the identity of Muḥammad's followers. For al-Baqara is not only the longest sura of the Qurʾān and effectively its first chapter, but it also functions as a manifesto, containing the most lucid and extensive qurʾānic account of the historical and theological significance of the emerging Muslim community. Through Ishmael, al-Baqara endows early Muslims and their sanctuary with an Abrahamic pedigree, which in turn justifies why the Prophet's followers are recipients of a new *kitāb* and poised to replace the Israelites as the new religious elect.

However, Ishmael's ancestral role is invoked in two other suras of the Qurʾān as well. In Kor 14, 35-41, Abraham is described as having settled some of his progeny (*min ḏurriyyatī*) by God's Sacred House (*ʿinda baytika l-muḥarrami*), after which he prays for the wellbeing of this community and thanks God for having bestowed upon him "Ishmael and Isaac" in his old age. The text therefore implies that the Prophet and his community are descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, owing their security and prosperity to their righteous patriarchs. Similarly, when the sura al-Ḥaǧǧ mentions Abraham's purification of the House (*al-bayt*) for the sake of pilgrims (Kor 22, 26) or urges the Prophet's community to hold fast to "the creed of your father Abraham" (Kor 22, 78), it highlights the Abrahamic ancestry of the Prophet and his followers—an ancestry that is predicated on the latter's putative descent from Ishmael.

In other qurʾānic contexts, Ishmael is said to be among God's patient servants (Kor 21, 85), among the excellent (Kor 38, 48), and among those chosen by God over other people (Kor 6, 86). Another sura describes Ishmael as a messenger and a prophet who was "true to promise" and "commanded his family to perform the prayer and to give alms," thereby being "pleasing in the sight of God" (Kor 19, 54-55). Finally, Kor 3, 84 and 4, 163 include Ishmael's name in the list of patriarchs and prophets. By mentioning Ishmael alongside other righteous descendants of Abraham, these texts consolidate his status as one of God's most pious servants.

Although Ishmael's vital role in al-Baqara and his promotion in other suras undermines the claim that he has a "quite minor footprint in the Qurʾān,"[80] it is nevertheless correct that he is not one of the text's oft-mentioned

80 Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, p. 212.

personalities. With only twelve occurrences, Ishmael's name pales in comparison to Moses (136 times) and Abraham (69 times), and is even less frequent than Adam (25 times), Solomon (17 times) and David (16 times). However, this does not diminish the importance of the Qur'ān's references to Ishmael. First, as is clear from the Abraham segment of al-Baqara (as well as the above-cited verses of Ibrāhīm and al-Ḥaǧǧ), Ishmael's role is inherently subsidiary. He is a bridge that connects the Prophet and his followers to Abraham, as spiritual prestige and privilege emanate from the latter, not from Ishmael himself. It is therefore understandable that Ishmael does not take centre stage in the Qur'ān. Second, even though the Qur'ān does not turn Ishmael into a major figure on the order of Moses and Abraham, its positive portrayal of Ishmael represents a significant intervention in the history of biblical interpretation. In order to appreciate the extent and import of this qur'ānic intervention, it is necessary to revisit the image of Ishmael in the Bible and in post-biblical Judaeo-Christian writings. It is to a survey of this subject that I now turn.

2 Ishmael Before the Qur'ān

2.1 *A Non-Promising Start*

In the Torah, Ishmael is the beloved child of Abraham's old age, but he is also Abraham's first son and thereby suffers the "deflection of primogeniture" that occurs repeatedly in Genesis.[81] This is not to say that Ishmael is bereft: God sends an angel to his pregnant mother to alleviate her distress. The angel tells Hagar to name her son Ishmael, a name that means "God heeds" and signals the Lord's attention to Hagar and her child. Subsequently, when God announces the covenant of circumcision to Abraham, He declares that Ishmael "shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Gen 17, 20).[82] However, even though Ishmael is thus blessed and also circumcised, he remains an outsider. His immutable alienation is heralded already in the angelic annunciation to Hagar, which declares that Ishmael shall be "a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him" (Gen 16, 12). Moreover, God explicitly excludes Ishmael and his posterity from the Abrahamic covenant. Announcing the future birth of Isaac to Abraham,

81 For this upending of the fortunes of firstborn sons in Genesis, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York, Basic Books, 2011, p. 180. Other examples of this pattern consist of Cain-Abel, Esau-Jacob, and Manasseh-Ephraim.

82 All biblical quotations are according to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

the Lord tells the patriarch that "my covenant I will establish with Isaac" (Gen 17, 21).

The dismissal of Ishmael is set in motion when Isaac is weaned. In a feast held for the celebration of this event, Sara sees Ishmael "playing" (*mətzaḥēq*, מצחק)—a pun on Isaac's name (Yitzḥāq, יצחק) that hints at the possible conflation of roles between the two sons (Gen 21, 9). Sensing danger, Sarah swiftly asks Abraham to cast out Ishmael and his mother, for "the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (Gen 21, 10). Although this demand disquiets Abraham, God encourages him to honour Sarah's request and informs him that "it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you" (Gen 21, 12). While God ensures that Hagar and Ishmael survive in the desert and thrive thereafter, Ishmael's status as an outsider is consolidated when he takes an Egyptian wife (Gen 21, 21).[83] The Genesis narrative subsequently focuses on the line of Isaac, whose first-born Esau suffers a similar fate and cedes his birthright to Jacob, the progenitor of the Israelites.

2.2 *Rabbinic Portrayals of Ishmael*

While the Hebrew Bible recounts the exclusion of Ishmael from Abraham's household and covenant, it does not depict him or his descendants in a particularly negative light—an approach that it applies to Esau and his posterity.[84] This may explain why, as shown by Carol Bakhos, tannaitic and amoraic literature seldom portray the Ishmaelites as bitter rivals of the Israelites.[85] Indeed, one can even find positive statements about Ishmael in rabbinic writings.[86] However, dismissive portrayals of Ishmael and his posterity predominate, as the latter epitomize Israel's "rejected Other."[87] For instance, discussing the characterization of Ishmael as a "wild ass of a man" in Genesis 16, 12,

83 As a statement in *Genesis Rabbah* 53, 15 puts it with regard to Genesis 21, 21, "throw a stick into the air, and it will fall back to its place of origin." All translations of *Genesis Rabbah* are taken from *Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with notes, glossary and indices*, eds Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, London, The Soncino Press, 1961.

84 In Psalm 83, however, the Ishmaelites are listed among the foes of Israel and the Lord.

85 Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arabs*, Albany, State University of New York Press ("SUNY Series in Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion"), 2006, p. 50.

86 Thus, Bakhos draws attention to a tradition in the Palestinian Talmud (*Berakhot* 1, 6), which notes that Ishmael is one of the four biblical figures who were named before they were born, attributing this to the fact that they were righteous. Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, p. 36.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 86. As Bakhos notes, however, the biblical difference in the portrayals of Ishmael and Esau is reflected in rabbinic writings, which often describe Esau and Edomites in far more negative terms than Ishmael and his descendants (*ibid.*, p. 54, 64).

a tradition of *Genesis Rabbah* (45, 9) explains that "whereas all others plunder wealth, [Ishmael] plunders lives." Similarly, *Genesis Rabbah* 53, 11 contains a number of negative interpretations of Ishmael's "play" in the feast of Isaac's weaning (Gen 21, 9). According to an opinion attributed to Rabbi Akiba, "Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonour them." Another tradition accuses Ishmael of idolatry, maintaining that "Sarah saw Ishmael build altars, catch locusts, and sacrifice them" (*Gen Rabb* 53, 11). A third opinion surmises that Ishmael attempted to murder Isaac "whilst pretending to be playing." Imputing the cardinal sins of idol worship, bloodshed, and unlawful sexual intercourse to Ishmael, these traditions suggest that he was excluded from the Abrahamic covenant because of his propensity to violate fundamental divine commandments.

Negative portrayals of Ishmael and his descendants also appear in the rabbinic sages' attempts to explain why God bestowed the Torah on the seed of Jacob but not on those of Ishmael and Esau or indeed any other gentile nation. According to a tradition found in the *Sifre* to Deuteronomy (*pisqa* 343), all nations were in fact offered the chance to receive the Torah:[88] "When the Blessed Holy One disclosed Himself to give the Torah to Israel, He didn't disclose Himself to Israel alone, but, rather, to all the nations."[89] It was the wickedness of other nations that prevented the realization of this universal potential. Thus, the descendants of Esau were murderers, so they rejected the Torah when they found out that it prohibits bloodshed. After mentioning Moabites and Ammonites, the midrash adds that God offered the Torah to Ishmaelites as well. Instead of being grateful and obedient, however,

> They asked: What's written in it?
> He replied: "Do not *steal*" (Ex 20, 13)
> They said: The very essence of these people, like their father, is *banditry*.
> For it is said: "And he shall be a wild ass of a man." (Gen 16, 12)[90]

88 This tradition anchors the idea of a multiplicity of attempted revelations to Deuteronomy 33, 2: "The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; with him were myriads of holy ones." The tradition takes the statements of this verse not as descriptions of the same epiphany but as representing a series of revelations. A similar tradition is found in *Mekhilta* (*Bahodesh* 5), which also provides a reason as to why God offered the Torah to other nations: "The nations of the world were asked to receive the Torah in order not to give them a reason to say before the Shekinah, 'Had we been asked to receive the Torah, we would have accepted it upon us.'" Transl. Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, p. 160, n. 82. This is highly reminiscent of Kor 6, 156-157.

89 The translation of this *pisqa* can be found at https://jewishstudies.washington.edu/book/sifre-devarim/chapter/pisqa-343, accessed 1st September 2019.

90 *Ibid.* Emphases are Jaffee's.

Depicting Ishmael as an aggressive marauder, this tradition casts his descendants as dyed-in-the-wool thieves who rejected the Torah on account of its proscription of theft.[91]

The just-discussed midrash evinces a global perspective, treating the Ishmaelites as one among many nations of the world who missed a golden opportunity to attain religious enlightenment. Another tradition in the same chapter of *Sifre*, however, recognizes the distinguished pedigree of Ishmaelites as descendants of Abraham. The question it seeks to answer, therefore, is why they did not partake of Abraham's covenantal bequest. Why did all the twelve sons of Jacob inherit from him, whereas only Isaac inherited from Abraham and only Jacob from Isaac?

> When Father Abraham came into the world, something unfit proceeded from him—Ishmael and the sons of Keturah.
> They pursued villainous deeds, even worse than former generations.
> Then, when Isaac came, something unfit proceeded from him—Esau and all the princes of Edom.
> They pursued villainous deeds, even worse than former generations.
> Now, when Jacob came into the world, nothing unfit proceeded from him!
> Rather, all his sons were born perfected. […]
> Therefore, the Blessed Holy One said: I'll give the Torah to you![92]

91 The stereotype of Ishmaelites as bandits also appears in the Palestinian Talmud (*Taʿanit* 3, 4, 15a), which reports that God regrets having created three things: Ishmaelites, Chaldeans, and the evil inclination. In the case of the Ishmaelites, on account of their thievery. Cited in Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, p. 67-68. This idea may be partly rooted in the story of Joseph in Genesis. For it is Ishmaelites who buy Joseph and take him to Egypt (37, 27-28), and the imprisoned Joseph later tells his inmates that "I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews" (40, 15).

92 Following Carol Bakhos, I have replaced Jaffee's rendition of *paslūṯ* (פסלות) as "filth" with "something unfit." Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, p. 56-57. Jacob Neusner translates *paslūṯ* as "chaff," while Hans Bietenhard has "Verwerfliches," *i.e.* something abject. Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy : an analytical translation*, Atlanta, Scholars Press ("Brown Judaic Studies", 101), 1987, II, p. 408; Hans Bietenhard, *Der tannaitische Midrasch Sifre Deuteronomium*, Bern, Peter Lang ("Judaica et Christiana", 8), 1984, p. 832. For various meanings of *paslūṯ* and the underlying verb, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London, Luzac & Co., 1903, II, p. 1197-1198. A similar midrash occurs in *Sifre* to *Deuteronomy, pisqa* 312. Indeed, according to Bakhos, "This notion that both Abraham and Isaac produced blemished offspring is fairly common in rabbinic literature of the amoraic period." Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, p. 56.

Just like the previous midrash, this tradition also places the blame squarely on the shoulders of those excluded from the covenant. It was not arbitrary divine favouritism that channelled Abraham's legacy through Isaac's line. Rather, it was the shortcomings and misdeeds of Ishmael and his posterity that made them unable to share the covenant with the Israelites. Indeed, the transgressions of Ishmael and Esau cast a shadow on Abraham and Isaac, making them inferior to Jacob in terms of the perfection of their issue.

2.3 *Ishmael in Early Christianity*

2.3.1 Paul

Discussion of Ishmael's image in early Christianity must begin with the *Epistle to the Galatians*. Here the Apostle Paul offers an interpretation of Ishmael that has proven fateful for subsequent Christian assessments of Abraham's first-born son. A primary goal of Paul in this letter is to forestall the spread of Jewish practices, above all circumcision, among the Gentile members of the churches of Galatia. Appalled at the activities of the "Judaizers," Paul rails against those who insist on doing "the works of the law" after having received the gospel of Jesus Christ (Gal 3, 2). The apostle then draws attention to Abraham, whom God deemed righteous on account of his faith in the Lord (Gen 15, 6), and with whom God entered into a covenant. Noting that Mosaic law was given to the Israelites 430 years after this covenant, Paul concludes that the latter could not have rested on the law. The law not only came after the covenant, but it was also merely a temporary measure imposed because of the Jews' transgressions (Gal 3, 19). The time of the law came to an end with the coming of Jesus, who was the real subject of God's promise to Abraham (Gal 3, 19). For "we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed" (Gal 3, 23). Now that Jesus has come, those who have faith in him have no need to remain in prison. Through their faith in Christ, they shall become Abraham's descendants (Gal 3, 29), nay God's own children (Gal 3, 26), and thereby beneficiaries of God's promise to Abraham.

It is precisely this image of the law as a prison guard, and thus those under its tutelage as shackled and enslaved, that Paul uses to interpret the story of Ishmael and Isaac. Drawing attention to the fact that Hagar was a slave of Sarah, the apostle maps their contrasting stations to the already established opposition of law versus promise as well as that of flesh versus spirit. Adopting an "overstretched reasoning that is a polemicists' sharpest tool,"[93] Paul turns Hagar into a symbol of the old covenant, the earthly Jerusalem, and bondage to

93 Robert Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 158.

the law (Gal 4, 21-25). Sarah, on the other hand, represents the promise fulfilled through Jesus, the heavenly Jerusalem, and justification through faith. So long as they reject Jesus Christ, therefore, the physical descendants of Sarah are in reality children of the bondswoman and consequently slaves. Furthermore, apparently understanding Ishmael's "play" with Isaac as persecution, Paul warns that those who seek to impose the law on Gentile Christians are persecuting them, similar to Ishmael who persecuted Isaac. And just as Sarah did not tolerate this persecution and had Ishmael and Hagar cast out, Galatians must forcefully repudiate those who want to impose circumcision and other Jewish observances on their congregations.[94] Paul thus offers an allegorical interpretation of the story of Hagar and Ishmael that alchemizes it into a proof-text for his specific theological and soteriological project.

2.3.2 Origen

The authoritative impact of Paul's subversive reading of the story of Genesis can be seen in the homiletic reflections of Origen of Alexandria (185-232), the first Christian scholar to author running commentaries on the books of the Bible. Although condemned as a heretic in later centuries, Origen's vast corpus of writings exerted considerable—if often indirect—influence over later Christian interpretations of scripture. Origen discusses the story of Hagar and Ishmael in his homilies on Genesis. In trying to tease out the lessons of this story for his audience, Origen's main strategy is to quote, paraphrase, explain, and elaborate on Paul's pertinent remarks in the letters to Galatians and Romans. Thus, Origen notes that those who live "according to the flesh" are children of Hagar and thereby stand opposed to those who live "according to the spirit," that is to say, believers in Christ who are real heirs to the Abrahamic promise.[95] Indeed, Origen further consolidates Ishmael's negative image by expounding upon Paul's interpretation of Ishmael's "play" as "persecution." Because Ishmael and Isaac represent the flesh and the spirit respectively, Ishmael's play with Isaac is an allusion to the "enticing deceitfulness" of the flesh when it lures the spirit into material pleasures.[96] This is a form

94 For further discussion of *Galatians*, see Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A commentary on Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press ("Hermeneia"), 1979; G. Walter Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts*, Sheffield, JSOT Press ("Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series", 29), 1989. For a concise analysis of Paul's references to Abraham in the *Epistle to the Romans*, see Gregg, *Shared Stories*, p. 161-167.

95 Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press ("Fathers of the Church", 71), 1982, p. 129.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

of persecution, Origen asserts, which is comparable to the physical persecution of pagans when they force Christians to sacrifice to idols.[97] Indeed, Origen characterizes the persecution of the spirit by the flesh as "the greatest persecution," thereby implying that succumbing to worldly lust is worse, and perhaps also harder to avoid, than physical abuse at the hands of idolaters.[98]

Origen's ruminations on the idea of persecution thus lead to further denigration of Ishmael and therefore the Jewish people, who are—spiritually speaking—the descendants of Hagar the bondswoman through Ishmael. Admittedly, Origen mitigates this negativity to some extent by offering hope for the Jews, thus paralleling Paul's more conciliatory tone in the *Epistle to the Romans*. Going back to the biblical text, Origen notes that while Isaac became exclusive heir to Abraham's covenant and possessions, Ishmael remained a descendant of Abraham, was blessed as the father of a great nation (Gen 17, 20), and received gifts from his father (Gen 25, 6).[99] Thus, instead of portraying Ishmael as an antithesis of Isaac, Origen depicts him as Isaac's inferior. This enables Origen to see the two sons of Abraham as symbols of two different types of faith, one based on "dread and fear of future judgement" and the other motivated by "love."[100] Origen maps this difference not only to the contrasting religious approaches of Judaism and Christianity, but also to the various levels of faith within the Church. After all, Christians are not immune from worshipping God out of fear and clinging to the scripture's carnal sense.[101] But this is no solace for the Jews, whose strict adherence to the letter of the Law fails them.[102] Spiritual abundance can come to them, however, when "the eyes of the synagogue are opened"—that is to say, when they acknowledge Christ as their Lord and become heirs to the Abrahamic promise.[103]

2.3.3 John Chrysostom

The writings of John Chrysostom (345-407) represent a significantly different context and interpretive strategy than those of Origen. While Origen came to be condemned as a heretic, John was hailed as a champion of orthodoxy—one whose sizable œuvre was retained and studied by future Christian scholars. And while the Alexandrian Origen is known for his allegorical readings of

97 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
98 *Ibid.*
99 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
100 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
101 *Ibid.*, p. 134-135.
102 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
103 *Ibid.*, p. 134. For a more extensive analysis of Origen's homily on Genesis 21, see Gregg, *Shared Stories*, p. 167-179.

scripture, John exemplifies the Antiochene approach that focuses primarily on the plain sense of the biblical text. This methodological difference is evident in John's homiletical reflections on Genesis and, in particular, his discussion of the stories of Hagar and Ishmael. In contrast to Paul and Origen, Chrysostom stays close to the literal sense and distills the moral lessons of the biblical text for the edification of his flock. In teasing out the message of Genesis 16, John explains the expulsion of the pregnant Hagar as a result of her disrespect for Sarah. He criticizes "the ingratitude" and "arrogance" of Hagar, who had given "no thought either to her mistress's ineffable forbearance, nor her own lowly station."[104] John also clarifies why Abraham—this "man of steel, God's noble athlete"—left Hagar's fate completely in Sarah's hands.[105] Seeking to proffer marriage counsel to his congregation, John reveals that Abraham was the ideal husband. The patriarch followed his wife's wishes completely because he said "[Hagar] is not a concern of mine; one thing alone concerns me, to keep [Sarah] undisturbed, without distress, free from any sorrow and enjoying the highest respect."[106] Though John thus validates Abraham and Sarah's expulsion of Hagar, he underlines the fact that Hagar received "favour from on high" as she was comforted and guided by an angel of the Lord.[107] Yet, John emphasizes that Hagar received such attention because of God's regard for Abraham, for Hagar "carried with her the just man's seed."[108] Overall, John does not demonize Hagar, and indeed acknowledges that God attended to her plight because of her association with Abraham. Nevertheless, in John's presentation, Hagar remains a recalcitrant and lowly servant with no inherent virtue of her own.

A similar image of Ishmael emerges from Chrysostom's 46th Homily. To begin, John does not offer a particularly nefarious interpretation of Ishmael's play with Isaac, such as idol worship or adultery as found in rabbinic writings. According to John, it is the very fact of playing that is problematic, for it disrespects the unbridgeable difference in station between Isaac and Ishmael. Sarah, John surmises, considered that "the son of the maidservant has nothing in common with my son Isaac."[109] The matriarch was therefore upset to

---

104 Robert C. Hill, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press ("Fathers of the Church", 82), 1990, p. 364.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 366.

106 *Ibid.*

107 *Ibid.*, p. 367.

108 *Ibid.* For example, he notes again that "the angel appeared, not on account of the maidservant's position, but out of regard for the just man" (*ibid.*, p. 368).

109 Robert C. Hill, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press ("Fathers of the Church", 87), 1992, p. 4. In this vein, and in terms reminiscent of Paul, John notes that Isaac was "the son born of grace and of the very gift of God" whereas Ishmael was "that of the Egyptian maidservant" (*ibid.*).

see Ishmael's "brashness" and "forwardness" in daring to play with Isaac.[110] She was concerned that if the distinction between the two sons is not maintained, after the death of Sarah and Abraham Ishmael would "thrust himself into his father's inheritance and become a sharer of it with Isaac."[111] Although defending Sarah's position, John also justifies Abraham's reluctance in carrying out Sarah's demand, noting that the patriarch "was well disposed towards his son for the reason that he was then still in his youth."[112] Perhaps the implication is that Ishmael grew into a violent person afterwards, but at the time he wasn't guilty of any crime. Thereafter, just as he had noted the favours granted to Hagar, John highlights the fact that Ishmael, according to the angel speaking to Hagar, was to become a mighty nation.[113] John then reminds his audience that despite expulsion from Abraham's household, Ishmael "grew in strength and developed into a great nation since, the text says, 'God was with the child'."[114] But Ishmael's material success was also for the sake of Abraham. After all, as John reminds us from the Bible, God told Abraham that Ishmael's posterity will be a mighty nation "because he is your offspring."[115]

2.3.4 Aphrahat and Ephrem

Having considered two contrasting approaches from the early Greek tradition, it is useful to investigate Syriac portrayals of Ishmael as well. Some pertinent references can be found in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat, a Christian author known as the "Persian Sage" who wrote in the first half of the fourth century CE in the Persian Empire. One of the earliest surviving works of Syriac literature, the *Demonstrations* includes 23 discourses that elaborate on Christian teachings by extensive recourse to scripture. In the eleventh discourse, titled "the demonstration on circumcision" (*taḥwīṯā da-ġzūrṯā*), Aphrahat criticizes the Jewish conception of circumcision as an integral and abiding element of God's covenant with Abraham. To counter this view of circumcision, Aphrahat argues that circumcision is prevalent among some non-Israelites as well. In particular, Aphrahat notes that "the descendants of Ishmael and Keturah and Lot and Esau" also practice circumcision, even though they also "worship many

110 *Ibid.*, p. 4. In the next homily, John attributes Sarah's disappointment to the fact that she "spied Ishmael being reared with Isaac" (*ibid.*, p. 14).
111 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
112 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
113 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
114 *Ibid.*, p. 12; citing Genesis 21, 20.
115 Genesis 21, 13; cited in *ibid.*, p. 6.

idols."[116] Absent faith in God and respect for his commandments, therefore, circumcision has no inherent value.[117] In addition to this disparaging characterization of Ishmaelites as idolaters, Aphrahat later makes a passing reference to the exclusion of Hagar and Keturah's descendants from Abraham's inheritance. Alluding to Genesis 25, 5-6 in mind, Aphrahat notes that Abraham "gave gifts to the descendants of Keturah and sent them [away] to Ishmael their brother, so that they would not be inheritors together with Isaac, the son of the promise (*bar mulkānā*)."[118] Aphrahat thus emphasizes the exclusivity of the covenant to Isaac and invokes Saint Paul's contrasting descriptions of Isaac and Ishmael respectively as born "through the promise" and "according to the flesh" (Gal 4, 23).

The works of Saint Ephrem (306-373), arguably the most influential writer of Syriac Christianity, also contain a number of references to Ishmael.[119] Some pertinent remarks can be found in Ephrem's paraphrastic commentary on Genesis. In his discussion of Genesis 21, Ephrem speaks of Ishmael "snickering" (*məġaḥḥeḵ*) at the feast of Isaac's weaning, reflecting the Peshitta's cognatic rendition of the Hebrew *mətzaḥēq* (playing).[120] Ephrem then connects Ishmael's attitude towards Isaac with Hagar's earlier lack of respect for Sarah (as recounted in Genesis 16, 4-5): "Sarah also saw how much Ishmael shared the characteristics of his mother, for just as Sarah was despised in the eyes of Hagar

116 Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, Piscataway, Gorgias Press ("Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies"), 2010, p. 266. The Syriac text of this demonstration can be found in W. Wright (ed.), *The Homilies of Aphraates, the Persian Sage, edited from Syriac Manuscripts of the Fifth and Sixth Century in the British Museum*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1869, p. 202-217. For an analysis of the demonstrations, see Eliyahu Lizorkin, *Aphrahat's Demonstrations: A Conversation with the Jews of Mesopotamia*, Leuven, Peeters ("Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium", 642; "Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Subsidia", 129), 2012.

117 Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, p. 263-265.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 272; Syriac text in Wright, *The Homilies of Aphraates*, p. 213.

119 For a brief discussion of Ephrem and his significance in Syriac Christianity, see Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 362-372.

120 Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press ("Fathers of the Church", 91), 1994, p. 166. The corresponding Syriac text can be found in Raymond-M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum: Commentarii*, Leuven, Peeters ("Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium", 153/72), 1955, p. 82. For the text of Peshitta, see *The Old Testament in Syriac: According to the Peshiṭta Version, part I, fascicle I* (*Genesis-Exodus*), Leiden, Brill, 1977, p. 38.

so too did Ishmael disrespect her son."[121] By emphasizing the shared characteristics of Hagar and Ishmael, Ephrem suggests that the latter remained essentially an outsider, a crude Egyptian like his mother.

Ephrem next turns to Sarah's demand for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. According to Ephrem, Sarah was not acting out of self-interest or petty, material considerations:

> Since it was a matter of God's promise, and the son of the concubine thought that he would be coheir with the son of the freewoman, Sarah said, "cast out the slave woman and her son" because it is not just that a son of a handmaid should have any inheritance together with that son of the promise, to whom it was promised by God.[122]

In other words, at stake was the integrity of God's promise to Abraham. According to divine providence, Isaac alone was selected to be "son of the promise" (*bar mulkānā*), a phrase that mirrors Paul's description of Isaac in his *Epistle to the Galatians*. Indeed, in defending Sarah's harsh measure, Ephrem casts Abraham as deficient. Vulnerable to fatherly love, Abraham had decided to make Ishmael coheir with Isaac, for "he made no distinction between his sons."[123] By demanding the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, therefore, Sarah was warning Abraham that "[i]t is not right that you be opposed to God and make an heir him who God has not made an heir."[124] It took Sarah's forceful intervention and God's siding with her to convince the distressed Abraham to dismiss his eldest son, a necessary step for safeguarding Isaac's covenantal inheritance.

In his hymns on the Nativity, Ephrem provides a more negative interpretation of Ishmael's action in the feast of Isaac's weaning. According to Ephrem, "that son of Hagar who was a wild ass (*ʿərāḏā*), kicked (*bəʿaṭ*) Isaac" (13, 17).[125] Departing from the Peshitta translation of Genesis 21, 9, Ephrem portrays Ishmael as a perpetrator of violence, invoking in this regard the description of

121 Mathews and Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works*, p. 166. For the Syriac text, see Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum*, p. 82.

122 Mathews and Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works*, p. 166-167; for the Syriac text, see Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri*, p. 82.

123 *Ibid.*

124 *Ibid.*

125 Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, New York, Paulist Press ("Classics of Western Spirituality"), 1989, p. 139. The Syriac text may be found in Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers: Hymnen de Nativitate* (*Epiphania*), Leuven, Peeters ("Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium", 187; "Scriptores Syri", 83), 1959, p. 76.

Ishmael as a "wild ass of a man" in Genesis 16, 12. The Syriac Father then praises Isaac for his forbearance in the face of Ishmael's aggression, considering Isaac a type for Jesus who similarly preached and practiced non-retaliation against violence.[126] The idea of Ishmael assailing Isaac is of course suggested by Paul's interpretation in Galatians 4, 29, which speaks of Ishmael having persecuted (*ἐδίωκεν*) Sarah's son. Diodore of Tarsus (d. *ca* 390) provides a philological justification for Paul's claim, noting that the verb used in the LXX translation of Genesis 21, 9 (*παίζω*) also appears in 2 Samuel 2, 14 in the context of a fatal military confrontation.[127] Diodore concludes, therefore, that this verb could have a violent implication also when it is attributed to Ishmael. A number of other exegetes, including Eusebius of Emesa (d. *ca* 359) and Acacius of Caesarea (d. *ca* 365), also understand Ishmael as having attacked Isaac and thereby provoked Sarah to demand the ouster of Hagar and her son from Abraham.[128]

In a later hymn, Ephrem comes back to the events recounted in Genesis 21. Noting Sarah's protective measures, Ephrem suggests that her reaction was motivated by her love of Christ. To this end, Ephrem adopts Paul's claim that the real object of God's promise to Abraham was in fact Christ, not the Jewish people.[129] Sarah was thus jealous not for selfish reasons but "because of You, O Free-born Son!" (20, 1).[130] In the refrain of this homily, Ephrem highlights the exclusivity of promise to the line of Isaac: "From the House of Sarah and from the peoples to You be glory!"[131] The locution "House of Sarah" is a pointed reminder that among Abraham's three wives—Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah—only Sarah produced descendants who had a share in God's covenant. But even Sarah's descendants were not all worthy of the promise, Ephrem reminds us, by likening Esau and Jacob to a wolf and a lamb, respectively. Ephrem then further consolidates the excluded status of Ishmael and Esau's progeny by describing the two men as "cursed" (*līṭē*).[132] This is reminiscent of the common Jewish practice of describing Esau as "wicked" (*rašaʿ*), a practice that is used only once in relation to Ishmael in pre-Islamic Rabbinic literature (*Genesis Rabbah* 62, 5).[133] In the degree of its negativity and its theological focus,

126 *Ibid*. Jesus was therefore "greater than the Law that requires recompense" (13, 15).

127 Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity: Encounters between Jewish and Christian exegesis*, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series", 24), 2013, p. 267 ff.

128 *Ibid.*

129 See Galatians 3, 16, which alludes to Genesis 12, 7.

130 *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, transl. McVey, p. 171.

131 *Ibid.*

132 *Ibid.*, p. 172; for the Syriac text, see Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers*, p. 103.

133 Indeed, Carol Bakhos suggests that this single instance may be an interpolation made after the rise of Islam. Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border*, p. 42.

therefore, Ephrem's characterization of Ishmael is closer to Paul's and Origen's than that of John Chrysostom.[134]

As these examples demonstrate, Ishmael did not occupy a prized position in late-antique Jewish or Christian thought.[135] For Jews, he was an outcast, excluded from Abraham's household and inheritance, a man of the desert who was worthy neither of the land nor of the law that was given to Isaac's descendants. For Christians, Ishmael was above all the son of Abraham "according to the flesh" but not the spirit, the son of the slave woman who inherited the servile state of his mother, and therefore a type for the spiritually incapacitated Jews toiling under the burden of the law. Jewish and Christian writers depicted Ishmael as a foil for their beloved Isaac, a potential rival who resorted to violence and persecution, a man guilty of idolatry and sexual misconduct—whose menacing ambitions were nipped in the bud thanks to Sarah's timely intervention.

This is not to say that Ishmael and his descendants were universally reviled. As we have seen, the biblical text is concerned with the dismissal of Ishmael, not his denunciation. Nevertheless, neither Genesis nor its later Jewish and Christian interpreters portray Ishmael in a particularly positive light. The qurʾānic description of Ishmael as a righteous messenger and prophet (*rasūlan nabiyyan*) therefore represents a radical departure from his pre-Islamic characterizations. The most compelling way to account for this departure is by

---

134 It does not seem that Jacob of Serug discusses Hagar or Ishmael in any of his published metrical homilies, as the "Index of Names and Subjects" published in *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug / Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, ed. Paul Bedjan, Piscataway, Gorgias Press, 2006, VI, p. 412-415, has no entries for Ishmael or Hagar. The pertinent biblical texts are similarly absent from the "Index of Main Biblical Passages" (*ibid.*, p. 410 ff). The prose homilies translated by Pius Zingerle similarly do not seem to mention Ishmael. Nor do the titles of other writings (helpfully provided at http://syri.ac/jacobofsarug, accessed 1st September 2019) yield promising leads in this regard. The same is the case with regard to Narsai. Judging by the titles of his homilies, it does not seem that they focus on Ishmael or his status in relation to Isaac. See *Homilies of Mar Narsai*, ed. Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, San Francisco, Patriarchal Press, 1970. See also the following link for a convenient list of these homilies, which are being collaboratively translated: https://cpart.mi.byu.edu/home/narsai/memre/narsai-clavis/, accessed 1st September 2019. My search in the works of Jacob and Narsai available on the Digital Syriac Corpus website (https://www.syriaccorpus.org, accessed 1st September 2019) similarly did not succeed in locating any treatment of Ishmael.

135 Other examples of early Christian commentary on the story of Hagar and Ishmael may be found in Mark Sheridan (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament II: Genesis 12-50*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2002, p. 30-61, 89-99. See also Elizabeth Clark, "Interpretive Fate amid the Church Fathers," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspectives*, eds Phyllis Trible and Letty Russell, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p. 127-147; and Grypeou and Spurling, *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity*, esp. the chapter on "Hagar and Ishmael" (p. 239-288).

recourse to Ishmael's genealogical and theological significance in the Qurʾān. Conceived as the ancestor of the Prophet and his community, Ishmael's image as a righteous prophet undermines the disparagement of his posterity at the hand of Jews and Christians. The qurʾānic Ishmael is neither sinful nor servile. As such, there is no reason why his descendants should be excluded from Abraham's spiritual legacy.

2.3.5 A Jubilean Influence?

If the Qurʾān's estimation of Ishmael diverges from that of the Bible, rabbinic writings, and early Christian literature, is it possible that the Qurʾān is not remaking Ishmael's image intentionally but rather preserving an earlier tradition less known to the Jewish and Christian writers considered above? In his learned doctoral dissertation, Suleyman Dost provides an analysis that suggests a positive answer to this question. Dost argues that the Qurʾān's accounts of patriarchal history, including its positive depiction of Ishmael, are inspired by an apocryphal tradition that has been partly preserved in the *Book of Jubilees*.[136] This work is a Second Temple retelling of Genesis (and parts of Exodus) that was considered canonical by Ethiopian Jews and Christians—and has therefore been preserved fully only in Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic).[137] To establish the hypothesis of (indirect) relationship between the Qurʾān and *Jubilees*, Dost draws attention to some qurʾānic texts that speak of God's granting (*wahabnā*) of "Isaac and Jacob" to Abraham, a phrasing that may suggest that Abraham was the father not only of Isaac but also of Jacob.[138] Some early modern scholars of the Qurʾān, such as Abraham Geiger, took this as a sign of the Prophet's confusion about patriarchal genealogy.[139] Dost suggests, however,

136 Suleyman Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān: Towards a Theory of Peninsular Origins*, PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2017, p. 188 ff. Dost does not claim that the Qurʾān features any direct borrowings from the *Book of Jubilees*. Rather, he views the Qurʾān as "an active interlocutor" in a tradition that included *Jubilees* and was preserved not so much in centers of Christian and Jewish learning in the north of the Arabian Peninsula but rather in those in its south, in particular in Ethiopia (*ibid.*). A similar connection between *Jubilees* and the Qurʾān (in particular the idea of Abraham as the founder of the Kaʿba) had already been suggested by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, p. 162, and Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and the Kaʿba: An inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic background of *dīn Ibrāhīm*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 13 (1990), p. 85-112, at p. 107-109.

137 The *Book of Jubilees* was "written in Hebrew, translated from Hebrew into Greek, and from Greek into Latin and Ethiopic. There may also once have been a Syriac translation." James C. Vanderkam, *The Book of Jubilees: A Critical Text*, Leuven, Peeters ("Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptores Aethiopici", 88), 1989, p. ix.

138 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān*, p. 212, citing Kor 6, 84; 11, 71; 19, 49; 21, 72; 29, 27.

139 See Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islám: A prize essay*, transl. F.M. Young, Madras, M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1898, p. 108 ff.

that the qurʾānic statements reflect a conception preserved in *Jubilees*, which posits a direct, special relationship between Jacob and Abraham: in *Jubilees*, it is Abraham who chooses Jacob over Esau, prays for Jacob's protection from the demonic Mastema, and calls himself Jacob's father (and Jacob his own son) right before his death.[140] According to Dost, the Qurʾān reflects this "strong corporal and spiritual connection" between Abraham and Jacob when it mentions that God granted "Isaac and Jacob" to the patriarch.

Turning to Ishmael, Dost notes that in *Jubilees* he is present in the audience of Abraham's discourse against idolatry, and also "gets gifts from [Abraham] before leaving to Paran and attends the funerary rites of his father."[141] He concludes, therefore, that the Qurʾān and *Jubilees* both evince "the resurfacing of Ishmael as a significant branch of the Abrahamic tree."[142] Incidentally, while Dost acknowledges that Ishmael is more prominent in the Qurʾān than in *Jubilees*—in particular as a co-founder of the Meccan house of worship with Abraham—he does not mention Ishmael's ancestral role in the Qurʾān. In describing the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael related in Kor 2, 128-129, for example, Dost writes that the two men ask God "to provide a messenger to the inhabitants of the 'secure city.'"[143] However, while Abraham asks God "to make this land secure" in Kor 2, 126, the subjects of his prayer with Ishmael in Kor 2, 128-129 are expressly described as "our descendants" (*ḏurriyyatinā*). Dost's formulation, therefore, leaves the genealogical component of this prayer unstated. A similar effect obtains when he notes that "the confident connection" between Ishmael on the one hand and the Prophet (as well as Arabs more generally) on the other hand is found "only in the later Muslim tradition."[144] According to Dost, the Qurʾān "prefers to provide Abraham as a prophetic typos to Muḥammad instead of a genealogical forefather."[145] Dost's analysis thus mirrors the approaches of Donner, Hoyland, Webb, and Neuwirth in sidelining the genealogical function of Abraham and Ishmael in the Qurʾān.

In my view, the hypothesis of a Jubilean connection does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the Qurʾān's valorization of Ishmael. Before making an argument to this effect, it is necessary to provide more details about Ishmael's portrayal in *Jubilees*. As Dost mentions, *Jubilees* attributes an exhortatory address to Abraham (dated to the year 2052) and includes Ishmael in

140 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān*, p. 212-213, citing *Jubilees* 19, 15-18; 19, 26-28; and 22, 16.

141 Dost, *An Arabian Qurʾān*, p. 214. However, Ishmael's reception of gifts and his role in the burial of Abraham are already mentioned in Genesis (25, 5-9).

142 *Ibid.*, p. 214.

143 *Ibid.*

144 *Ibid.*, p. 214.

145 *Ibid.*

the audience of this address. What is of primary significance is that Abraham's address offers a strikingly inclusive vision of the divine covenant. Summoning all of his descendants—Ishmael, Isaac, and the sons of Keturah (Abraham's third wife) as well as his grandchildren—Abraham urges them to avoid idolatry and impurity in all forms, and to "circumcise their sons in the covenant which he had made with them" (20, 3).[146] This statement seems to suggest that not only the "House of Sarah" (on which see above) but also the descendants of Hagar and Keturah participate in the Abrahamic covenant.[147] While here all of Abraham's sons enjoy his attention, in the year of Abraham's death (2109) it is only Ishmael who joins Isaac in order to celebrate the festival of weeks with their father. "Abraham was happy that his two sons had come," *Jubilees* informs us (22, 1), adding that he prayed that God's "kindness and peace rest on your servant and on the descendants of his sons so that they, of all the nations of the earth, may become your chosen people and heritage" (22, 9). This is a remarkable statement that suggests Ishmaelites are among God's chosen people. In addition to containing these two positive facts about Ishmael and his descendants, *Jubilees* lacks Genesis's negative description of Ishmael as a "wild ass of a man" who would be in constant strife with others (Genesis 16, 12).[148] Finally, *Jubilees* does not provide a negative interpretation of Ishmael's play with Isaac, and indeed attributes Sarah's negative reaction to her jealousy towards Ishmael (17, 4).

While these facts speak in favour of Ishmael's status, it would be inaccurate to claim that *Jubilees* promotes Ishmael and his progeny in a consistent and systematic way. For one, Abraham's address suggests the potential participation of all of his descendants in the covenant, including not only Ishmael's line but also the children of Keturah.[149] More importantly, numerous passages of

146 My quotations of *Jubilees* are taken from James Vanderkam's translation (cited above).

147 Earlier, when recounting how God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and his sons, *Jubilees* highlights the vital significance of this ritual: "Anyone who is born, the flesh of whose private parts has not been circumcised by the eighth day does not belong to the people of the pact which the Lord made with Abraham but to the people (meant for) destruction" (15, 26).

148 Indeed, *Jubilees* relates Hagar's pregnancy and the birth of Ishmael very briefly (14, 21-24), omitting Genesis 16's references to the tensions between Hagar and Sarah, the flight of Hagar, the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Hagar in the desert, and the annunciation of Ishmael to Hagar (including his name and characteristics).

149 The same might be the case with Abraham's prayer after the festival of weeks, because when he speaks of the "descendants of his sons" (22, 9) he may have all of his sons in view, not Isaac and Ishmael alone.

Jubilees decidedly undercut an inclusive conception of the covenant.[150] In particular, immediately after relating the circumcision of Abraham and the male members of his household as related in Genesis 17, *Jubilees* adds an extensive discourse that repeatedly declares the exclusivity of the covenant to Israelites in dramatic terms (15, 25-34). Highlighting the significance of circumcision, *Jubilees* proclaims:

> (15, 29) the command has been ordained as a covenant so that they should keep it forever on all the Israelites. (15, 30) *For the Lord did not draw near to himself either Ishmael, his sons, his brothers, or Esau. He did not choose them* (simply) because they were among Abraham's children, *for he knew them*. But he chose Israel to be his people. […] (15,31) *He made spirits rule over all* [*other nations*] *in order to lead them astray from following him*. (15, 32) *But over Israel he made no angel or spirit rule because he alone is their ruler*.

If Abraham hopes that all of his male descendants will perform circumcision (*Jubilees* 20, 1-10), this passage establishes that in reality non-Israelites have no share in the Abrahamic covenant. Moreover, it presents this covenantal economy as a reflection of the cosmic order: Israelites can enter into covenant with the Lord because they are ruled by Him, whereas all other nations (including the descendants of Hagar and Keturah as well as those of Esau) are controlled by demonic spirits.[151]

Jubilees signals the radical distinction of Israel not only in the context of discussing circumcision, but also with reference to sabbath—two commands that God prescribes first for the angels of the presence and the angels of holiness.[152] After recounting the prescription of sabbath for themselves, these angels inform Moses that God told them:

150 Thus, the Lord informs the childless Abraham that He shall "become God for you, your son, your grandson, and all your descendants" (12, 24)—thereby alluding to the eventual exclusion of Ishmael and Esau by using "son" and "grandson" in the singular.

151 In the words of Jacques van Ruiten, "the covenant between God and Israel is inherent to the order of creation." Jacques van Ruiten, *Abraham in the Book of Jubilees: The Rewriting of Genesis 11:26-25:10 in the Book of Jubilees 11:14-23:8*, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism", 161), 2012, p. 167.

152 Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, redaction, ideology and theology*, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism", 117), 2007, p. 239.

> "I will now separate a people for myself from among my nations. They, too, will keep sabbath. […] I have chosen the descendants of Jacob among all of those whom I have seen. I have recorded them as my first-born son and have sanctified them for myself throughout the ages of eternity." […] *The creator of all blessed but did not sanctify any people*(*s*) *and nations to keep sabbath on* [*earth*] *except Israel alone* (2, 19-20; 2, 31).

This text cements the distinction of the Israelites from other nations. They are God's "first-born son," the Lord's own share from humanity. Crucially, this passage differentiates "blessing" from "sanctification." Other nations may receive the former, as when they enjoy God's bounty on earth, but it is only Israel that is sanctified and earmarked for the Lord. God's plan for Israel is later relayed to Abraham, when the visiting angels inform him that "all the descendants of his sons would become nations and be numbered with the nations. But *one of Isaac's sons would become a holy progeny and would not be numbered among the nations*" (16, 17). This assertion further highlights the uniqueness of the Israelites not only in relation to non-Abrahamic peoples but also vis-à-vis all other descendants of Abraham.

The *sui generis* character of Israel is manifest not only in the context of circumcision and sabbath, but also with regard to the festival of weeks—the third major element of covenant in *Jubilees*. Although Ishmael and Isaac are both present for holding this festival in Abraham's final year, there is no indication that the two sons thereby achieve parity. On the contrary, it is only Isaac who slaughters and offers a sacrifice, and subsequently "prepare[s] a joyful feast in front of his brother Ishmael" (22, 4). After all, according to the previous chapter of *Jubilees*, it was Isaac alone who received the detailed cultic instructions that Abraham had found "written in the book of my ancestors, in the words of Enoch and the words of Noah" (21, 10).[153] In addition to Isaac, Rebecca also prepares bread for the festival. Crucially, both Isaac and Rebecca give what they make to Jacob, who in turn takes these offerings to "his father Abraham" (22, 4-5). Throughout this, Ishmael is a completely passive observer, not an active participant in the festival. Furthermore, *Jubilees*' emphasis on the intimate connection between Abraham and Jacob—both here and elsewhere—signals that Abraham's patrimony is transferred safely and directly from Abraham

153 There are other ways in which *Jubilees* suggests that Isaac is the only son that truly matters. Thus, after recounting Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, the Lord praises Abraham for "not refus[ing] me your first-born son whom you love" (18, 15). The description of Isaac as "first-born" is highly significant and seems to turn Ishmael from an irrelevant figure into a non-existent one.

to the father of Israelites, thereby suggesting that Esau and, all the more so, Ishmael are excluded from the covenant.[154]

Considering the totality of pertinent references in *Jubilees*, it does not seem that Ishmael fares any better in this text than in Genesis. Admittedly, *Jubilees* does not present Ishmael as a malicious rival of Isaac, as is the case in some later Christian and Jewish writings. Moreover, in a few occasions it suggests that Hagar's descendants (as well as those of Keturah) take part in the Abrahamic covenant. However, many passages of Jubilees explicitly reject this possibility, claiming that non-Israelites are all ruled by demonic spirits and headed for destruction. In an effort to account for such tensions and contradictions, Michael Segal has argued that *Jubilees* is not a unitary composition but "made up of various texts which were collected and edited together in a comprehensive framework."[155] On the other hand, Michael Francis has proposed that *Jubilees* refrains from negative characterizations of Ishmael because it does not consider him threatening to Isaac. According to Francis, Ishmael's Egyptian roots means that he "does not possess the genetic equipment to function as a genuine rival to Sarah's son."[156] Whatever the case may be, *Jubilees* does not portray Ishmael as a righteous individual, and indeed repeatedly denigrates non-Israelites (including Ishmael and his descendants). Therefore, it does not seem that Jubilean traditions offer a meaningful precedent for the qurʾānic depiction of Ishmael as an upright prophet of God whose progeny stands to take over the mantle of Abraham from the Israelites.[157]

154 Thus, Abraham tells Rebecca to "take care of my son Jacob because he will occupy my place on the earth" (19, 17). Abraham subsequently addresses Jacob himself: "My dear son Jacob whom I myself love, may God bless you from above the firmament […] everything that he promised to give me may he attach to you and your descendants until eternity […]. May the Lord God become your father and you his first-born son and people for all time" (19, 27-9).

155 Segal, *The Book of Jubilees*, p. 320.

156 Michael Francis, "Defining the Excluded Middle: The Case of Ishmael in *Jubilees*," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 21/3 (2012), p. 259-283, at p. 273.

157 Incidentally, there are many other ways in which the Qurʾān's accounts of patriarchal history differ significantly from those of *Jubilees*. For instance, the latter describes Abraham's father as a believer (12,6), whereas the Qurʾān describes him as an idol maker (21, 52). In *Jubilees*, Abraham destroys his town's idols when he is 60 years old (12, 12), whereas in the Qurʾān he performs this task in his youth (21, 60). The *Book of Jubilees* does not mention Abraham interceding on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, whereas the Qurʾān does so (11, 74-76). Lot is an extremely negative figure in *Jubilees* (16, 8) but a prophet in the Qurʾān (6, 86). *Jubilees* does not mention Lot's wife, although the Qurʾān does so (15, 59). As for the Jubilean notion of Jacob as a son of Abraham, it is not at all clear that the Qurʾān subscribes to this idea or even to some kind of special relationship between Abraham and Jacob. The Qurʾān's references to God's granting of "Isaac and Jacob" to Abraham may

3 Abraham and Ishmael in the Ḥiǧāz: The History of a Problem

3.1 *Arabs as Familiar Aliens*

The qurʾānic claim that the Prophet and his followers are descendants of Abraham should not have struck contemporary Jews and Christians as unfounded. Already Genesis had suggested that Ishmael's descendants live in the deserts to the south and east of the Israelites.[158] Saint Paul had seized on this geographical conception to taint the old covenant with a Hagarene association by alluding to the fact that Mount Sinai (upon which Moses received the Torah) is located in the desert territory of Hagar's descendants: "Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia" (Galatians 4, 25). And although Paul probably envisioned Arabia as proximate to the Promised Land, Hellenistic geography applied the term Arabia to the Peninsula as a whole.[159] It was therefore easy to imagine the inhabitants of the inner Arabian desert also as Ishmaelites.[160]

The idea that Muslims are descended from Ishmael is in fact front and centre in some of the earliest literary sources that discuss the emergence of Islam. Arguably the most substantive of these sources is the historical work written in Armenian around 660s CE and often (erroneously) attributed to Sebeos, Bishop of the Bagratunis.[161] Likely a churchman, the author of this work opens

simply reflect the pervasive practice of mentioning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob together as the patriarchs of the Jewish people.

158 According to Genesis, the banished Ishmael settled "in the wilderness of Paran" (21, 21) and his descendants inhabited the desert to the south and east of Palestine, living "from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria" (25, 18).

159 Strabo (d. *ca* 25 CE) attributes to Eratosthenes (d. *ca* 195 BC) a division of Arabia into "the northerly, or desert, part" on the one hand and "Arabia Felix" on the other. Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo: With an English translation by Horace Leonard Jones*, London, William Heinemann Ltd, 1917-1932, VII, p. 309.

160 For example, in the context of explaining Paul's allusion to Arabia as an abode of Hagar's descendants, Theodore of Mopsuestia (*ca* 350-428) notes that "in times of old Arabia was not only the region that now has that name but included the entire desert and the places that were inhabited round about the desert." Theodore of Mopsuestia, *The commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul*, transl. Rowan A. Greer, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature ("Writings from the Greco-Roman World", 26), 2010, p. 123. Michael MacDonald argues that even *Provincia Arabia* was seen by Roman authorities as including areas south of Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ (modern al-ʿUlā): "There would have been no point in Rome (or indeed the kingdom of *Nbṭw* before it) drawing a line in the sand somewhere south of al-ʿUlā and declaring this the frontier of its territory, when there was (from the Roman point-of-view) nothing—*i.e.* no recognizable state—on the other side." Michael MacDonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic before Late Antiquity," *Topoi*, 16 (2009), p. 277-332, at p. 300-301.

161 According to James Howard-Johnston, this work "presents the only wide-ranging, connected account to be found in a non-Muslim source written close to the events, in the seventh century." James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and*

his account of Islam's rise with the following statement: "I shall speak of the stock of Abraham, not of the free one but of that born from the handmaiden, concerning which the divine word was fulfilled: 'His hands on all, and the hands of all on him.'"[162] Quoting Genesis 16, 12 and invoking Galatians 4, 22—key texts we have encountered before—the author conceptualizes Islamic conquests as a fulfilment of the prophecy announced to Hagar and therefore as a venture of Ishmael's descendants.[163] The author thereafter designates the followers of Muḥammad primarily in terms of their putative Ishmaelite ancestry, describing them variously as "the sons of Ishmael," "Ishmaelites," "the army of Ishmael," "the Hagarenes," or simply "Ishmael."[164] Another work written about the same time, the Syriac text known as the *Khuzestan Chronicle*, characterizes Muslims variously as "the sons of Ishmael" (*bnay Īšmāʿīl*), "Ishmaelites" (*Īšmāʿīlāyē*), and *ṭayyāyē* (often translated as "Arabs" or "nomads").[165] Similarly, the late seventh century *Book of Main Points*, authored by John bar Penkāyē, routinely denotes Muslims as "Sons of Hagar" (*bnay Hāġār*)[166] and, like the mentioned Armenian chronicle, views their success as the fulfilment of Genesis 16, 12's prophecy about Ishmael.[167] Finally, writing probably in the early eighth century, John of Damascus (d. *ca* 750) describes Islam as "the still-prevailing people-deceiving practice of the Ishmaelites."[168]

Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 100.

162 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

163 His account of the Prophet Muḥammad's teaching also has a thoroughly genealogical thrust, and is thereby starkly reminiscent of the logic of al-Baqara as discussed before. According to our historian, Muḥammad told his fellow Ishmaelites that God had previously "loved Israel" and thereby given them the Promised Land, but "now you are the sons of Abraham, and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you" (*ibid.*, p. 96).

164 *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, transl. Robert William Thomson, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1999, p. 98, 101, 102, 103, 104, *et passim*.

165 See Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A sourcebook of the earliest Syriac writings on Islam*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2015, p. 49-53. For the Syriac text, see Ignatius Guidi (ed.), *Chronica Minora*, Leipzig, Otto Harrassowitz ("Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Scriptores Syri. Series Tertia", 4), 1903, p. 15-39, esp. p. 30-39.

166 Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, p. 88, 90, 91. The Syriac text is provided in Alphonse Mingana (ed. and transl.), *Sources Syriaques*, Leipzig, Otto Harrassowitz, 1907, I, p. 1-171, esp. p. 143-171.

167 Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, p. 89.

168 Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian heresiology and the intellectual background to earliest Christian-Muslim relations*, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("The History of Christian-Muslim Relations", 34), 2018, p. 219.

There is thus a remarkable confluence between the Qurʾān and these early sources in characterizing Muḥammad and his followers as descendants of Ishmael. However, this non-qurʾānic literary evidence is also disregarded by Donner and Webb. For example, while Donner invokes the chronicle attributed to Sebeos, the *Khuzestan Chronicle*, and the *Book of Main Points*, he does not mention their genealogical descriptions of the Prophet and his followers.[169] Of the designations that appear in these and other early works, Donner mentions only *ṭayyāyē*/*mhaggrāyē* in Syriac and *agarēnoi*/*magaritai* in Greek,[170] claiming that the last three are all derived from the Arabic *muhāǧirūn*.[171] As Sidney Griffith has pointed out, however, *agarēnoi* was in use as early as the fourth century in contexts that clearly signify descent from Hagar, so it cannot be a reflex of *muhāǧirūn*.[172] In a recent essay, Donner departs from his earlier view, writing that "for these Greek-speaking Christian authors [*agarēnoi*] was a reference to the conquerors' supposed descent from Abraham via his slave-girl Hagar."[173] However, Donner dismisses the significance of this appellation by adding that "the conquerors never refer to themselves as descendants of Hagar."[174] In other words, Donner casts the only genealogical designation that he mentions as an outsider term, not based on or conforming to the Believers' own self-image. Similarly, Peter Webb makes no reference to the frequent characterization of Muslims as Ishmaelites in early Christian sources, instead mentioning only *ṭayyāyē, sarakenoi/saraceni* (Saracens), *mhaggrāyē*, and *magaritai*—the latter two of which he takes to be derived from *muhāǧirūn*.[175] He does not mention *agarēnoi* at all.

169 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 112-114, 176.

170 The only exception is Donner's reference to the "famous treatise on 'The Heresy of the Ishmaelites'" by John of Damascus, but Donner makes no further comment on the significance of this genealogical description. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 223.

171 *Ibid.*, p. 118, 134.

172 Sydney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muḥammad, His Scripture and His Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century," in *La vie du prophète Mahomet*, ed. Toufic Fahd, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France ("Bibliothèque des centres d'études supérieures spécialisés"), 1983, p. 99-146, at p. 123. In fact, Griffith claims that not only *agarēnoi* but also *magaritai* and *mhaggrāyē* should be understood as signifying the Hagarene descent of Muslims (*ibid.*, p. 122 ff).

173 Fred M. Donner, "Talking about Islam's origins," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 81/1 (2018), p. 1-23, at p. 20-21. Indeed, in his earlier paper, "From Believers to Muslims," p. 43, Donner cites Griffith's essay and accordingly translates not only the Greek *agarēnoi* but also the Syriac *mhaggrāyē* as "Hagarene," although he mentions in a footnote that *mhaggrāyē* might be connected with *muhāǧirūn* as well.

174 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

175 Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, p. 141 ff, 150, 170, n. 119.

At any rate, the early practice of designating Arabs, or even all Muslims, as Ishmaelites remained popular in Christian and Jewish writings of subsequent centuries.[176] It was not until the early modern period that European scholars became aware of certain intricacies and uncertainties in the Arab genealogical tradition—for example the notion that Ishmael was the forefather of northern Arabian tribes but *not* the southern ones, or the idea that the native Arabic tradition knew the Prophet's family tree only up to Maʿadd b. ʿAdnān but *not* to Ishmael himself. However, working within a biblical frame of reference, most scholars still accepted as genuine the Ishmaelite ancestry of tribes in the north and centre of the Arabian Peninsula.[177]

While the Ishmaelite ancestry of Arabs was generally accepted, there was much skepticism about the qurʾānic idea of Ishmael and Abraham as founders of the Meccan temple, and the concomitant tradition of Ishmael having settled in Mecca. This was a natural result of disdain for the Kaʿba and its rituals. According to Anastasius of Sinai (d. *ca* 700), some Christian captives in Mecca had witnessed the sacrifice of many sheep and camels during the day, only to wake up at about midnight and see "an indecent and horrible old woman ris[ing] from the ground" and taking away the heads and feet of the offered animals. This indicated that Muslim sacrifices did not go "up towards God, but down."[178] Somewhat later, John of Damascus had decried the Muslim

176 For example, Peter the Venerable (d. 1156) addresses the prologue of his *Contra sectum* to "the Arabs, sons of Ishmael, who serve the law of him who is called Muhammad." Cited in John Victor Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European eyes in the Middle Ages*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2008, p. 60.

177 Writing in 1847, the French historian Armand-Pierre Caussin de Perceval noted that the northern Arabs (the so-called "Children of ʿAdnān") are so unanimously believed to be Ishmael's posterity that it would be an "excess of skepticism" to reject this belief. Armand-Pierre Caussin de Perceval, *Essai sur l'histoire des Arabes avant l'islamisme, pendant l'époque de Mahomet et jusqu'à la réduction de toutes les tribus sous la loi musulmane*, Paris, Firmin Didot, 1847, I, p. 184. Similarly, in his seminal biography of the Prophet published a decade later, William Muir surveyed pertinent biblical references and concluded that "a great proportion of the tribes of northern and central Arabia were descended from Abraham." William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet: With introductory chapters on the original sources for the biography of Mahomet, and on the pre-Islamite history of Arabia*, London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1861, I, p. cxvi. The French historian Ernest Renan, however, voiced a dissenting opinion: "The legend according to which Arabs descend from Ishmael has often been considered as having historical value and providing a strong confirmation of the stories of the Bible. In the eyes of a discerning critic, however, that is not admissible. It cannot be doubted that the biblical reputations of Abraham, Job, David, and Solomon would have begun among the Arabs towards the fifth century." Ernest Renan, "Mahomet et les origines de l'islamisme," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 12 (1851), p. 1063-1101, at p. 1092.

178 Cited in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam*, Princeton, The Darwin Press

accusation of idolatry against Christians for venerating the cross, noting that Muslims kiss the Black Stone (*al-ḥağar al-aswad*) and rub themselves against it, even though in reality it is "the head of Aphrodite, [...] upon which, even now, one who looks carefully can see on it traces of a carving."[179] An explicit rejection of Abraham's construction of the Kaʿba appears in a later text that converts from Islam had to publicly recite in order to be admitted to the Byzantine Church. Dating from before the twelfth century, and possibly as early as the ninth century, this text has the new converts anathematize "the fabulous story of Muhammad, in which he claims that a stone house was erected to God by Abraham and Ishmael in Bakka or Makka."[180]

The Ishmaelite pedigree of the Kaʿba was similarly questioned by early modern scholars such as Ludovico Maracci (1612-1700).[181] Still later, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, William Muir considered the story of Ishmael settling in Mecca as "a travestied plagiarism from Scripture," and hence rejected the possibility that Abraham and Ishmael could have founded the Kaʿba and its pilgrimage rituals.[182] However, unlike the Byzantine text quoted before, Maracci and Muir did not see the Prophet as the originator of this notion. Rather, they believed that Muḥammad had adopted it from pre-Islamic Arabian tradition.[183] Belief in the antiquity of this idea and in the genuineness

("Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam", 13), 1997, p. 101. For a more recent discussion of this and other stories of Anastasius about early Muslims, see Stephen Shoemaker, "Anastasius of Sinai and the Beginnings of Islam," *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*, 1/2 (2018), p. 137-154.

179 Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam*, p. 227.

180 Edouard Montet, "Un rituel d'abjuration des musulmans dans l'Église grecque," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 53 (1906), p. 145-163, at p. 9. The Greek text shows awareness of the two qurʾānic appellations understood to refer to Mecca (Kor 3, 96; 48, 24). For a more recent discussion of this text and its dating, see Daniel Sahas, "Ritual of Conversion from Islam to the Byzantine Church," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 36 (1991), p. 57-69. Unlike this Byzantine text, the *Khuzestan Chronicle* accepts the Abrahamic origin of the Kaʿba: "concerning the Dome of Abraham [*qub̲teh d-Ab̲rāhām*], we could not find out what it is except for this. Because the blessed Abraham had became [*sic*] rich in property and also wanted to be far from the Canaanites' envy, he chose to dwell in the vast and distant parts of the desert. As a tent dweller, he built that place for God's worship and the offering of sacrifices." Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, p. 52-53.

181 Neal Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II and Islam as an Abrahamic Religion," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, 2/2 (1991), p. 182-205, at p. 188. The same position is embraced by George Sale in the "Preliminary Discourse" to his 1734 translation of the Qurʾān, where he conjectures that the Kaʿba "was most probably dedicated at first to an idolatrous use." *The Koran: commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed*, transl. George Sale, Philadelphia, J.W. Moore, 1856, p. 83.

182 Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, I, p. cxxv-cxxvi.

183 Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II, and Islam," p. 188; Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, I, p. cxxix, ccxv. Muir even had developed an explanation for how such an idea originated. He

of Arabs' Ishmaelite ancestry, however, soon faced a significant challenge at the hands of Aloys Sprenger, arguably the most important biographer of the Prophet in the nineteenth century.

3.2 *Resolving an Ancient Riddle*

An Austrian physician and Orientalist, Aloys Sprenger (1813-1893) was Europe's foremost authority on Muslim historiographical writings, thanks in part to the extensive manuscript collection he had procured during his sojourn in South and West Asia.[184] He wrote two biographies of the Prophet: a one-volume text in English (1851), and a veritable three-volume *magnum opus* in German (1861-1865). Already in the first work, Sprenger had suggested that the story of Abraham and Ishmael's construction of the Kaʿba was a relatively recent invention. According to Sprenger, in attributing the rites of the Meccans to "their father Abraham," the Prophet was following the so-called *ḥanīf*s, pious ascetics who renounced idolatry and searched for the true religion of Abraham just before Muḥammad's advent.[185] Positing an Abrahamic pedigree for the Kaʿba was therefore "neither ancient nor general among the pagan Arabs."[186]

In his later, multi-volume *magnum opus*, Sprenger departed from this position. Taking up the chronological approach to the Qurʾān that had been introduced by Gustav Weil, Sprenger offered a detailed account of the Prophet's life and teachings by interlacing a diachronic reading of the Qurʾān with the accounts of the *sīra-maġāzī* literature. In translating and discussing much of the Qurʾān in its supposed chronological order, Sprenger chanced upon a curious fact: the oldest qurʾānic reminiscences of Abraham do *not* describe him as the forefather of Meccans or Arabs, do *not* name Ishmael as his son, and do *not* portray Abraham as the founder of the Kaʿba. For most of the Meccan period, Abraham is simply a champion of monotheism and the first patriarch of the Jewish nation. Later qurʾānic texts, by contrast, explicitly mention Isaac and Ishmael as Abraham's sons, have Abraham establish the Kaʿba and its rites, and consider Ishmael among the patriarchs second only to Abraham himself. In Sprenger's view, the inevitable conclusion was that the later Abraham is an

---

surmised that "[t]he Nabatheans, or some other mercantile nation of this [Ishmaelite] stock" settled in Mecca and "brought along with them the Abrahamic legends which intercourse with the Jews had tended to revive and perpetuate" (*ibid.*, I, p. ccxvi).

184 For which see Aloys Sprenger, *A Catalogue of the Bibliotheca Orientalis Sprengeriana*, Giessen, Wilhelm Keller, 1857.

185 Aloys Sprenger, *The Life of Mohammad: from original sources*, Allahabad, The Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851, p. 103. Muir rejected Sprenger's position, claiming that Abraham's association with the Kaʿba "must be regarded as of ancient date even in Mahomet's time." Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, I, p. ccxv ff.

186 *Ibid.*

invention of the Prophet, not a figure known to Meccans before Islam. This gripping idea was to engender much interest and controversy in scholarly circles for the next century.

According to Sprenger, the story of Abraham settling Hagar and Ishmael in Mecca originated in the late Meccan period, "in or soon after 619," and was recounted in Kor 14, 35-41—the first qurʾānic text to name Ishmael in connection with Abraham.[187] Slightly later but shortly before the migration to Medina, Muḥammad also introduced the idea of Abraham as the founder of Kaʿba's rites of worship, in Kor 22, 26-31, a text that the Prophet recited in the spring of 622 to the party of Medinans who had travelled to Mecca to form an alliance with him.[188] Sprenger assessed the significance of this new depiction of Abraham in the following way:

> Through this lie, Muḥammad endowed Islam with all the things that man needs and which separate religion from philosophy: nationality, ceremonies, historical reminiscences, mysteries, and the means to gain paradise through violence and to deceive his own conscience as well as others. Through this invention, Muḥammad impressed his own, human seal upon Deism and thus turned it to Muḥammadanism.[189]

In its early phase, Sprenger maintained, Islam was a system of belief that emphasized monotheism and righteousness free from parochial considerations. However, according to Sprenger, the valorization of Mecca's rituals through Abraham made Islam permanently entangled within a particular context and thereby turned it into the religion of a specific community, who would henceforth seek to project influence and power over the adherents of other religions. Still later, with "fanatic exclusivism," the Prophet repeated the ancestral roles of Abraham and Ishmael and depicted them as the founders of the Meccan sanctuary itself, in the (Medinan) Abraham segment of the sura al-Baqara discussed before.[190]

Sprenger's hypothesis appeared to be a dramatic vindication of the emerging, "scientific" study of the Qurʾān. By imposing chronological order on the Muslim scripture, scholars were able to detect patterns hitherto concealed in the Qurʾān's labyrinthine text. The shift in the portrayal of Abraham and Ishmael was arguably the most salient fruit of Sprenger's qurʾānic

187 Aloys Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Moḥammad: nach bisher grösstentheils unbenutzten Quellen*, Berlin, Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1861-1865, II, p. 279-280.

188 *Ibid.*, II, p. 279.

189 *Ibid.*

190 *Ibid.*, II, p. 280.

scholarship. It pertained to an age-old point of contention—"the fabulous story of Muhammad, in which he claims that a stone house was erected to God by Abraham and Ishmael in Bakka or Makka"[191]—resolving it decisively in favour of Christian polemicists and against the Prophet. Sprenger's analysis also indicated that the Abrahamic ancestry of Arabs was not a recognized fact for the inhabitants of Mecca and its environs. Could the Prophet have "invented" this idea as well? While Sprenger was now doubtful that this idea had any reality,[192] he did not consider the Prophet to be the first to cast Abraham and Ishmael as the forefather of Arabs. In his view, this idea was already espoused by some Arab Christians who, armed with biblical knowledge, had sought to construct a more august genealogy for themselves. The Prophet learned about the Ishmaelite ancestry of Arabs from these Christians.[193]

While Sprenger was the first to develop the hypothesis that we may call "Abraham's qurʾānic reinvention," it was a later scholar's formulation of this hypothesis that gained traction in academic circles. The scholar in question was Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), a Dutch Orientalist and colonial advisor who reformulated Sprenger's hypothesis in his 1880 Leiden doctoral dissertation, titled *Het Mekkaansche Feest* (*The Mecca Festival*).[194] Snouck Hurgronje provided a plausible rationale for the changing portrayals of Abraham in the Qurʾān by focusing on the Prophet's relationship with the Jews. In the Meccan period, Snouck Hurgronje held, the Prophet had considered his teachings to be similar to the Jews', and therefore had hoped that the latter would support his position against obstinate pagans.[195] After coming to Medina, however, the Jews snubbed the Prophet, leading him to conclude that they had strayed from the right path. In order to differentiate himself from Mosaic Judaism, therefore, he began to identify his mission with the *milla* ("religion") of Abraham, towards which he now called pagans and Jews alike.[196] Further, having amassed significant influence in Medina, the Prophet hoped to turn his "native town"

191 See n. 178, above.

192 Thus, unlike in his earlier biography of the Prophet, in the new work Sprenger consistently qualifies the Abrahamic ancestry of Arabs as "alleged," *e.g. ibid.*, II, p. 256.

193 *Ibid.*, II, p. 283. For further on this sect of Christians, whom Sprenger called "Raḥmānists," see below.

194 Translated into English as Snouck Hurgronje, *The Mecca Festival*, transl. Wolfgang Behn, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2012. Snouck Hurgronje does not cite Sprenger explicitly in discussing Abraham, but, in the preface, he acknowledges his debt to Sprenger's English and German biographies (*ibid.*, p. 7). I am thankful to Marijn van Putten for clarifying to me the proper way to refer to Snouck Hurgronje.

195 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

196 Snouck Hurgronje thus assigns all passages that speak of *millat Ibrāhīm* to Medina, thereby in several cases (such as Kor 6, 161 and 16, 123) going against Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorâns*, on which he otherwise relies (*ibid.*, p. 22).

of Mecca into the "centre of the true religion," thereby changing the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca. It was therefore inevitable that he should connect the Kaʿba to Abraham, the founder of the true religion.[197] Fortunately, he had learned from Medinan Jews the necessary ingredients for establishing this connection: Muḥammad realized that Abraham is Ishmael's father, that Ishmael is the forefather of Arabian tribes, and that Abraham had sent away Ishmael and his mother to the desert. These data suggested an obvious solution to the problem of the Kaʿba's former pagan status: the Prophet claimed that Ishmael had in fact settled in Mecca and founded the Kaʿba with Abraham, together dedicating it to the one God. It was for the purpose of "Islam's emancipation from Judaism," therefore, that Muḥammad promoted Abraham as the founder of the true religion and the Kaʿba.[198]

Beyond providing a clear justification for Abraham's qurʾānic reinvention, Snouck Hurgronje sought to prove that the absence of genealogical connection between Ishmael and Arabs in Meccan texts was evidence of ignorance. In this vein, Snouck Hurgronje made two observations: 1) some early verses (Kor 32, 3; 34, 44; 36, 6) assert that no warner had been sent to the Prophet's people or to their fathers, an assertion that Snouck Hurgronje believed would not have made sense if the Prophet considered Meccans to be Ishmaelites; and 2) three early passages refer to the inviolability of the Meccan sanctuary (Kor 27, 91; 28, 57; 29, 67), but even though here Muḥammad evinces "respect for [the Meccans'] traditions, it never occurred to the Prophet to make Ibrahīm [*sic*] their patriarch and originator of their customs."[199] While these arguments from silence strengthened Sprenger's earlier observations, Snouck Hurgronje departed from Sprenger's periodization. Having defined the newfound significance of Abraham as a reaction to the Jews of Medina, Snouck Hurgronje assigned all passages that speak of the new Abraham to the Medinan period. Snouck Hurgronje's formulation of the hypothesis of Abraham's transformation, as well as his arguments and dating of pertinent passages, were rapidly adopted by eminent scholars of the Qurʾān and early Islam such as Julius

197 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

198 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

199 *Ibid.*, p. 21. According to Snouck Hurgronje, these passages were promulgated when the Prophet still held some "hope for a peaceful takeover of his native town," a condition that "can hardly have been the case during the final period of his activity at Mecca" (*ibid.*, p. 20-21).

Wellhausen (in 1887),[200] Hubert Grimme (in 1895),[201] Henry Smith (in 1897),[202] David Margoliouth (in 1905),[203] Ignaz Goldziher (in 1910),[204] Henri Lammens (in 1914),[205] and Joseph Horovitz (in 1926).[206] It was also enshrined in various entries of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*[207] and, perhaps most importantly, endorsed in Nöldeke and Schwally's second edition of *Geschichte des Qorāns* (1909).[208] The qurʾānic reinvention of Abraham was so widely accepted that,

200 Julius Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten: Drittes Heft, Reste arabischen Heidentumes*, Berlin, Georg Reimer, 1887, p. 64 ff.

201 Hubert Grimme, *Einleitung in den Koran: System der koranischen Theologie*, Münster, Aschendorff Buchhandlung ("Darstellungen aus dem Gebiete der nichtchristlichen Religionsgeschichte", 11), 1895, p. 60-67.

202 Henry Smith, *The Bible and Islam: Or the influence of the Old and New Testaments on the religion of Mohammed*, London, James Nisbet & Co., 1897, p. 38-40.

203 David Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons ("Heroes of the Nations"), 1905, p. 104.

204 Ignaz Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung ("Religionswissenschaftliche Bibliothek", 1), 1910, p. 9.

205 Henri Lammens, "Les Chrétiens à la Mecque à la Veille de l'Hégire," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, 14 (1914), p. 191-230, at p. 230.

206 Joseph Horovitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin, Walter De Gruyter & Co. ("Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients", 4), 1926, p. 91. Another significant publication of this year was Taha Hussein's *Fī l-šiʿr al-ǧāhilī*, Cairo, Maṭbaʿat Dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya, 1926, wherein he claimed (likely under the influence of Sprenger) that the story of Ishmael settling in Mecca and founding the Kaʿba with Abraham "appeared shortly before Islam, and Islam utilized it for a religious reason, and Mecca accepted it for a religious as well as a political reason" (*ibid.*, p. 29). His description of the qurʾānically-endorsed story as a fabricated tale created an uproar in Egypt, whereupon he had to recant this position and remove the relevant statements from the second edition of his work, now titled *Fī l-adab al-ǧāhilī*, Cairo, Maṭbaʿat al-Iʿtimād, 1927. In the extensive introduction to this new edition, however, Hussein lamented the fact that the religious significance of Arabic language and literature makes it off limits to scrutiny, "for proper scientific investigation requires criticism and refutation and rejection, and at the very least skepticism" (*ibid.*, p. 54 ff).

207 See in particular Isaac Eisenberg and Arent Jan Wensinck, "Ibrāhīm"; Arent Jan Wensinck, "Kaʿba"; and Frants Buhl, "Muḥammad." The main body of the entry "Ibrāhīm" was written by Eisenberg, but Wensinck (being the encyclopedia's editor) appended a paragraph to Eisenberg's text, therein briefly recapitulating Snouck Hurgronje's theory. For more on Wensinck's intervention and the controversy it helped spawn, see Willem A. Bijlefeld, "Controversies Around the Qur'anic Ibrāhīm Narrative and Its 'Orientalist' Interpretations," *The Muslim World*, 72/2 (1982), p. 81-94.

208 In the first German edition of this work (published in 1860), Nöldeke had considered verses 118, 119, and 124 of sura 16 to be Medinan, but had not considered this possibility for verses 120-123, which discuss Abraham and make reference to the "religion of Abraham" (*millat Ibrāhīm*). Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorâns*, Göttingen, Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860, p. 109. In the revised edition of 1909, however, Nöldeke and Schwally note Snouck Hurgronje's arguments approvingly, quote him at

writing in 1952, Edmund Beck could describe it as "one of the few secure results" of western scholarship on early Islam's development as reflected in the Qur'ān.[209]

3.3 *Consensus and its Discontents*

While the hypothesis of Abraham's qur'ānic reinvention found wide acceptance, it was critiqued at some length by Charles Torrey, an American historian and Semiticist. Against the agreement of Muslim tradition and modern scholarship, Torrey believed that before Islam there was a sizable Jewish presence not only in Medina but also in Mecca.[210] He therefore believed that the Prophet was familiar with biblical lore already before the *hiǧra*.[211] This familiarity, Torrey reasoned, would certainly have included the idea that Arabs are descendants of Abraham through Ishmael.[212] Moreover, given the two patriarchs' ancestral status, Torrey considered it likely that pre-Islamic Meccan "popular tradition" had already affiliated Abraham and Ishmael with the Kaʿba.[213] While this new understanding of Mecca's religious demographics made a Medinan reinvention of Abraham inherently unlikely, Torrey also challenged a number of Snouck Hurgronje's specific arguments. In particular, Torrey took issue with Snouck Hurgronje's excision of certain verses from Meccan suras (such as 6, 14, 16, and 22) and his assignment of these verses to Medina simply because they speak of the religion (*milla*) of Abraham, mention his ancestral connection to Meccans, or associate him with the Meccan sanctuary.[214] Not only is there no good reason to have these Meccan suras "chopped up," Torrey maintained, structural and stylistic considerations demonstrate that the supposedly Medinan verses of these Meccan suras are of a piece with the remainder

length, and suggest that verse 124 (and thus the entire Kor 16, 110-124 pericope) of the sura al-Naḥl may be Medinan (*ibid.*, I, p. 146-147). Similarly, based on Snouck Hurgronje's analysis, Nöldeke and Schwally suggest that verses 35-41 of the sura Ibrāhīm should be considered Medinan (*ibid.*, I, p. 152). Still, they suggest that the story of Abraham and Ishmael founding the Kaʿba may have been created before the Prophet by Arabian Jews or Christians who, despite abandoning paganism, would have wanted to continue participating in the Kaʿba's rites (*ibid.*, p. 147, n. 3).

209 Edmund Beck, "Die Gestalt des Abraham am Wendepunkt der Entwicklung Muhammeds: Analyse von Sure 2,118(124)-135(141)," *Le Muséon*, 65 (1952), p. 73-94, at p. 73.

210 Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, p. 15.

211 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

212 *Ibid.*, p. 83, 88 ff, 102.

213 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

214 *Ibid.*, p. 89, 91 ff. A similar position is taken by Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, p. 179-182.

of these chapters.[215] The qurʾānic figure of Abraham was thus already fully formed in Mecca, having no relation with a supposed "emancipation" of Islam from Judaism.

While Torrey offered a number of penetrating observations and arguments, he did not address a key point raised by Sprenger and Snouck Hurgronje, namely, the fact that several early and middle Meccan suras comment on Abraham and Ishmael but do not connect these two figures either with each other or with the Prophet's community, instead mentioning only Isaac and Jacob in relation to Abraham. This lack of explicit connection between Abraham and Ishmael received more attention from a later critic of Snouck Hurgronje, namely, Youakim Moubarac. A Lebanese French Islamicist and a Maronite priest, Moubarac was a disciple of Louis Massignon (d. 1962), the tireless advocate of improved Christian-Muslim relations who had a major role in promoting the common Abrahamic pedigree of Islam and Christianity. In his seminal *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, published two years after Torrey's monograph, Massignon had briefly dismissed Snouck Hurgronje's analysis, writing in a footnote that the Prophet must have had "at least a latent awareness" of Ishmael's relation to Abraham already in Mecca.[216] In Massignon's view, this awareness is suggested by the fact that the peculiar qurʾānic rendition of Abraham's name (*Ibrāhīm*) appears to be modelled on Ishmael's name (*Ismāʿīl*), just as elsewhere the Qurʾān harmonizes the names of related entities (such as the angels Hārūt and Mārūt).[217] In his study of the qurʾānic depiction of Abraham, which is graced with a prologue by Massignon, Moubarac highlighted this point and made further observations to demonstrate Ishmael's implicit connection with Abraham in Meccan passages.

In particular, to buttress the claim that Meccan suras exhibit knowledge of Ishmael's relation to Abraham, Moubarac drew attention to the following facts:[218]

215 Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, p. 92. A more developed and cogent form of this view appears in Nicolai Sinai's *Fortschreibung und Auslegung: Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz ("Diskurse der Arabistik", 16), 2009, p. 106-113.

216 Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1997 (1935[1]), p. 75, n. 1.

217 The idea that *Ibrāhīm* results from harmonization with *Ismāʿīl* already appears in Nikolaus Rhodokanakis's review of Samuel Sycz's *Ursprung und Wiedergabe der biblischen Eigennamen im Koran* published in *Wiener Zeitschrift fur die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 17 (1903), p. 281-286, at p. 283.

218 Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran: l'histoire d'Abraham dans le Coran et la naissance de l'Islam*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin ("Études musulmanes", 5), 1958, p. 64-67.

1) Ishmael is called a *nabī* in Kor 19, 54 (a title the Qurʾān reserves for biblical prophets), and he appears in Kor 6, 86 in a list of prophets who are described as descendants of Abraham (*ḏurriyyatihi*).
2) According to Kor 19, 55, Ishmael exhorted his family to observe prayer (*ṣalāt*) and almsgiving (*zakāt*). Moubarac points out that this statement mirrors the assertion of Kor 21, 73, according to which God revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob "the establishment of prayer and the remission of alms."
3) Kor 38, 48 places Ishmael in an onomastic trilogy (together with Idrīs and Ḏū l-Kifl), which seems to respond intentionally to the earlier-mentioned triumvirate of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Kor 38, 45.
4) Distance between the names of Abraham and Ishmael or disjunction between their reminiscences does not prove that they were considered unrelated. After all, Lot's name and story also appear apart from Abraham's (*e.g.* in Kor 37, 133-138)—even though their kinship is highlighted elsewhere. In fact, Moubarac observes that in Kor 6, 86 Ishmael's name *precedes* that of Lot.

In addition to enumerating these indications, Moubarac addressed a question posed by Snouck Hurgronje, namely, why do certain Meccan texts honour the Kaʿba but do not mention its Abrahamic pedigree or that of the Meccans. In Moubarac's view, pagan Meccans prided themselves on following their fathers and identified their own practices with those of their ancestors, so if the Prophet had reminded them of their more ancient biblical forebears, the Meccans would not have been open to understanding the latter in a different light than their more recent ancestors. The Prophet first needed to make monotheism triumphant, and only afterwards could he emphasize the ancestral links of Arabs to the founders of monotheism in order to endow this idea with historical roots pertinent to the Arabs.[219]

3.4 *A French Connection*

The question of the Abrahamic-Ishmaelite pedigree of Arabs and the Kaʿba remained of particular interest to Francophone scholarship. Two studies are in particular noteworthy. The first was penned by Michel Hayek, also a Maronite priest and a friend of Louis Massignon. In *Le mystère d'Ismaël*, Hayek extensively recapitulates, elaborates, and defends the claims and arguments of Sprenger and Snouck Hurgronje, but departs from the polemical tone of these Orientalists. Moreover, Hayek eloquently discusses the significance of the qurʾānic utilization of Ishmael from the viewpoint of religious history, noting

219 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

how it enabled Arabs and non-Arabian Muslims ("spiritual Arabs") to claim the biblical heritage as their own.[220] As regards the major points of contention between the proponents and opponents of Abraham's Medinan reinvention, however, Hayek does not advance the conversation in a substantive way. For instance, against Torrey and Moubarac who resist the displacement of Kor 14, 35-41 from its Meccan context, Hayek insists that this passage should be considered Medinan without offering any new arguments to this effect. Rather, like Snouck Hurgronje, Hayek notes that some Meccan suras assert that the Prophet's community had received no warners before him, even though the Meccan Kor 19, 55 envisions Ishmael as preaching to his people (*ahlahu*). This means, Hayek claims, that in Mecca the Prophet did not consider Ishmael to be the ancestor of Meccans.[221] However, already Torrey had rejected Snouck Hurgronje's reasoning on this, arguing that Kor 19, 55 concerns Ishmael's exhortation to his own family (*ahlahu*), not to a broader community.[222] While rejecting Torrey's dating, Hayek does not address his criticism of Snouck Hurgronje's underlying rationales for the relegation of Kor 14, 35-41 (and other verses from Meccan suras) to the Medinan period.

The writings of Massignon, Moubarac, and Hayek were not purely academic ventures but participated in wider socio-cultural debates. The practical implications of these works for Christian-Muslim relations can be seen in certain developments at the Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962-8 December 1965). No less an authority than Pope Paul VI, whose reign began after the council's first session, was closely acquainted with Louis Massignon and shared his sympathetic view of Islam.[223] It was largely thanks to Pope Paul VI that the council gave serious consideration to Muslims in its discussions of ecumenism. The "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," for example, favorably compares the devotion of Muslims to that of Abraham, "with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself."[224] This document also mentions the reverence of Muslims towards Mary, noting that "at times

220 Michel Hayek, *Le mystère d'Ismaël*, Tours, MAME, 1964, p. 34.

221 *Ibid.*, p. 68. Hayek thus does not consider the possibility of development *within* the Meccan period.

222 Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, p. 91. Indeed, if the qur'ānic verse intended to refer to Ishmael's people, it would have used *qawm* instead of *ahl*, as is the case elsewhere in the Qur'ān (*e.g.* Kor 22, 43).

223 Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II, and Islam," p. 194.

224 The declaration can be found at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html, accessed 28th May 2018.

they even call on her with devotion." Both statements smack of Massignon's influence.[225]

The status of Muslims is also discussed in the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church." The initial draft of this document had declared Muslims to be "the sons of Ishmael, who acknowledging Abraham as their father also believe in the God of Abraham"—adding that Muslims "are not total strangers to the revelation made to the Patriarchs."[226] There was overwhelming opposition to this formulation, however, in particular to its description of Muslims as "sons of Ishmael." It appears, in fact, that the July 1964 publication of Michel Hayek's monograph had motivated and strengthened this opposition, casting doubt on the historicity of Arabs' Ishmaelite ancestry.[227] Taking such objections into account, the final version of the Dogmatic Constitution (promulgated in November 1964) characterizes Muslims as those "who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind."[228] The statement therefore highlights the significance of Abraham for Muslims but omits reference to Ishmael and refrains from expressly identifying Islam with Abraham's faith. It was a compromise between contrasting approaches that were best exemplified in the works of Massignon and Moubarac on the one hand and that of Michel Hayek on the other.

The next and final French study to make a meaningful contribution to this debate was René Dagorn's *La geste d'Ismaël*, which undertakes an onomastic investigation to probe the significance of Ishmael in Arab culture in the centuries before and after Islam. The relevance of onomastic data had already been recognized by Sprenger. In showing that the Abrahamic-Ishmaelite association of the Kaʿba was "neither ancient nor general among the pagan Arabs," Sprenger had noted the complete absence of biblical names (including Abraham and Ishmael) among the pre-Islamic pagans of the Ḥiǧāz.[229] The impression that Sprenger had asserted in one sentence, Dagorn proves with

225 According to Robinson, "the reference to Muslim reverence for Mary is due largely to the intervention of Mgr. Descuffi, the Latin Archbishop of Smyrna with whom Massignon collaborated in reviving the cult of Mary at Ephesus." Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II, and Islam," p. 195.

226 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

227 Christian S. Krokus, "Louis Massignon's Influence on the Teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23/3 (2012), p. 329-345, at p. 333.

228 For the Dogmatic Constitution, see http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, accessed 28th May 2018.

229 Sprenger, *The Life of Mohammad*, p. 103-104.

a comprehensive analysis of three genealogical compendia: Ibn al-Kalbī's (d. *ca* 204/819) *Ǧamharat al-nasab*, Muṣʿab b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Zubayrī's (d. *ca* 236/851) *Kitāb Nasab Qurayš*, and Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī's (d. 456/1064) *Ǧamharat ansāb al-ʿarab*. Surveying their information about some 100 000 individuals, Dagorn shows that the names Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl have no attestation in the pre-Islamic period.[230] Turning to the epigraphic record, Dagorn notes the existence of dozens of inscriptions from north and south Arabia which contain various forms of the name Ishmael (including *ysmʿl, ysmʿl, smʿl*).[231] However, he suggests that these names either reflect an independent Semitic theophoric practice without relation to the biblical Ishmael or were born by Arabian Jews and Christians.[232] Dagorn therefore concludes that before Islam pagan Arabs had "no awareness of any association with Abraham through Ishmael."[233] As for the Qurʾān, Dagorn follows the interpretation proposed by Snouck Hurgronje and advocated most recently by Michel Hayek: in the Meccan period the Prophet did not know the connection between Ishmael and Abraham, having about prophets only "some vague and superficial knowledge" confined basically to their names.[234] Tapping the erudition of the Jews of Medina, the Prophet recognized Ishmael's status as a bridge between Abraham and Arabs, thereafter promoting the two patriarchs as the founders of the Kaʿba and champions of *ḥanīfiyya*.[235]

3.5 *A New Defense*

The arguments of Sprenger, Snouck Hurgronje, Hayek, and Dagorn do not contradict the fundamental point of this paper about the significance of Ishmaelite genealogy in the Prophet's preaching. Rather, these scholars only contend that

230 René Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismaël d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes*, Genève, Librairie Droz ("Centre de recherches d'histoire et de philologie de la IVᵉ section de l'École pratique des hautes études. 2, Hautes études orientales", 16), 1981, p. 100. The only exception is a certain Ibrāhīm b. Ayyūb, whose name Ibn al-Kalbī treats as unusual and explains its biblical character by reference to its bearer's Christian faith (*ibid.*, p. 44, 100).

231 *Ibid.*, p. 100. By contrast, the names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are "practically unknown" in the Arabian epigraphic record (*ibid.*, p. 107, n. 45).

232 *Ibid.*, p. 101. As to the possibility that the latter communities may have popularized Ishmael's name (and thus presumably also his alleged ancestral status) among pagan Arabs, Dagorn asserts that this is unlikely in the light of the literary record. In his view, the absence from the genealogical collections of pre-Islamic individuals bearing biblical names suggests that converts to Judaism or Christianity were no longer considered proper Arabs (*ibid.*, p. 102-103).

233 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

234 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

235 *Ibid.*, p. 132, 144 ff.

the alleged ancestral status of Ishmael, and the theological significance of this ancestry, were not part of this preaching from the beginning. Assuming for the moment that common scholarly periodizations of qurʾānic suras are roughly correct, it should be noted that Snouck Hurgronje's widely-adopted emphasis on a Medinan reinvention of Abraham in response to Medinan Jews is based on circular reasoning. This supposed post-*hiǧra* reinvention obtains only if we dislocate certain passages from their Meccan contexts (such as Kor 14), a dislocation that has no motivation beyond maintaining a neat Meccan-Medinan division between the qurʾānic portrayals of Abraham and Ishmael.

If we put Snouck Hurgronje's particular formulation aside, explicit recognition of Abraham and Ishmael's ancestral status appears already in the late Meccan period—a view that was held by Sprenger himself. Nevertheless, there is no denying that "Early" and "Middle" Meccan suras of the Qurʾān do not establish any connection between Abraham and Ishmael, even though they routinely associate Isaac and Jacob with the patriarch: Kor 19, 49-50; 21, 72; 29, 27; and 6, 84 mention God's bestowal of "Isaac and Jacob" on Abraham after recounting his renunciation of his idolatrous people; Kor 11, 71-74 relates the angels of the Lord announcing the birth of "Isaac, and after Isaac, Jacob" to Sarah and Abraham; Kor 38, 45 praises Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob together as righteous men "of might and vision" (*ūlī l-aydī wa-l-abṣār*); and in Kor 12, 38 Joseph characterizes monotheism as "the creed of my fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[236] None of these texts mention Ishmael as a member of the patriarch's family. It might appear, therefore, that at the time the Prophet was unaware that Abraham had fathered a son before Isaac.

The idea that the Prophet was initially ignorant of Abraham's first-born son, proposed by Sprenger and adopted by many scholars after him, runs into a problem because four of the surveyed texts are followed by reference to Ishmael. After Kor 6, 84 underscores God's bestowal of Isaac and Jacob on Abraham, the sura goes on to name fourteen of Abraham's righteous descendants, including Ishmael in the list. Similarly, while Kor 19, 49 notes the bestowal of Isaac and Jacob on Abraham, the text proceeds to mention first Moses and Aaron (Kor 19, 51-53) and then Ishmael (Kor 19, 54-55). In the sura al-Anbiyāʾ, the story of Abraham (Kor 21, 51-73) is followed by brief notices on Lot (Kor 21, 74-75), Noah (Kor 21, 76-77), David and Solomon (Kor 21, 78-82), and Job (Kor 21, 83-84), which then give way to references to Ishmael (Kor 21, 85)

236 In addition, Kor 51, 28-30 and Kor 15, 53-56 tell the story of God's angels announcing to Abraham and Sarah the birth of "a wise son" (*ġulāmin ʿalīmin*), which is evidently a reference to Isaac; and Kor 37, 100-113 ends a brief account of the Aqedah with the statement that God gave the good tidings of Isaac to Abraham and blessed the two.

as well as several other prophets (Idrīs, Ḏū l-Kifl, Jonah, Zachariah, John, and Maryam). Finally, in the sura Ṣād recognition of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is immediately followed by a similarly positive statement about Ishmael, Elisha (al-Yasaʿ), and Ḏū l-Kifl. The presence of Ishmael in these contexts makes it more difficult to maintain that the Prophet was unaware of Abraham's first-born son. What else could have caused the Prophet to name and praise Ishmael in the first place?

The proponents of Abraham's qur'ānic reinvention generally do not answer this question. Because many consider Muḥammad to have been utterly clueless about biblical history, perhaps they do not see the need to explain Ishmael's floating presence in these suras.[237] As far as I know, Sprenger is the only scholar to take this problem seriously. He claims that for a few years in Mecca the Prophet was under the influence of "Raḥmānists," a Christian sect who invoked the divine name Raḥmān in their liturgy and ritual. In Sprenger's view, many Arabs had converted to Raḥmānism and, in order to counter the Jews' ancestral pride, they had promoted Ishmael (their supposed forefather) as a righteous man of God. The Prophet "had overheard" (*erlauscht hatte*) from the Raḥmānists that Arabs are Ishmael's descendants, but he had not recognized Ishmael's relation to Abraham.[238] According to Sprenger, this is why some Meccan texts praise Ishmael but do not associate him with the patriarch. When Muḥammad found out about Ishmael's connection to Abraham (Sprenger doesn't say from whom), he began including Ishmael among the patriarchs and naming him as Abraham's son, starting with Kor 14, 39.[239] This scenario is not only highly speculative, it is also unconvincing. If the supposed Raḥmānist promotion of Ishmael were to be an effective strategy against the Jews, the most critical point would be to highlight Ishmael's connection with Abraham and to present the former as the rightful heir and successor of the latter. Had the Prophet had extensive dealings with Arabian Raḥmānists and borrowed ideas from them, he would surely have recognized this basic fact about their common ancestor.

The idea that Muḥammad was unaware of Ishmael's connection with Abraham until Medina or until his very last years in Mecca is enabled by a common but mistaken perception of the Prophet's intellectual development. To wit, Sprenger, Snouck Hurgronje, and many scholars after them (including

237 For example, Snouck Hurgronje speaks of the Prophet's "superficial knowledge of Judaism and Christianity" in the Meccan period, which was supposedly expanded in Medina as the Prophet came into increasing contact with the Jews. Hurgronje, *The Mecca Festival*, p. 21-23.

238 Sprenger, *Das Leben*, II, p. 283.

239 *Ibid.*

Hayek and Dagorn) portray the Prophet as largely ignorant of biblical history and fumbling in the dark before the *hiǧra*. This perception is informed by the idea, based partly on the *sīra*, that the Prophet had substantial contact with the People of the Book only after moving to Medina, from whose Jewish residents he purportedly obtained the bulk of his biblical knowledge. However, this idea is inconsistent with the qurʾānic text itself, at least if we accept the chronologies of the Qurʾān that have been commonly utilized in modern scholarship. According to these chronologies, most of the Qurʾān's accounts of the biblical past are located in Meccan suras, primarily in those assigned to the so-called "Middle" and "Late" Meccan periods. These include detailed narratives about Moses (suras 20 and 28) and Joseph (sura 12) as well as discussion of various episodes in the life of Abraham (suras 37, 21, 15, and 11). One of the few scholars to underline this fact was Charles Torrey, who therefore asserted that "[b]y far the most of what [Muḥammad] learned of Israelite history, literature, customs, and law was acquired in Mecca."[240] Considering the substantial biblical content of Meccan suras as well as their repeated reminiscences about Abraham, it seems unwarranted to insist that the Prophet was still unaware of a key element in the *vita* of the patriarch, namely, his siring of Ishmael and the latter's eventual expulsion. The actual presence of Ishmael in these suras makes this possibility further doubtful. Why, then, do these suras not establish an explicit connection between Abraham and Ishmael?

I believe Snouck Hurgronje was right to explain Abraham and Ishmael's shifting images as reflecting the Prophet's relationship with the People of the Book. However, in my view the decisive factor should not be sought in the *extent* of this relationship (and the biblical knowledge it supposedly imparted the Prophet) but in its *nature*. Judging by the Qurʾān, for much of the Meccan period the Prophet and his followers were struggling against pagan opponents. In this context, the Qurʾān sometimes presents the People of the Book, who are also termed Children of Israel (*banū Isrāʾīl*), as counterweights to pagans and as sources of knowledge and authority for the Muslim community (see *e.g.* Kor 6, 89; 10, 94). The qurʾānic estimation of the Israelites in this period is reminiscent of Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, which notes that "to [the Israelites] belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs" (9, 4-5). It also appears that certain Jews and/or Christians supported the Prophet, a welcome approach

240 Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*, p. 97. Torrey thus turned the problem on its head: based on the substantial biblical content of Meccan suras, he concluded that "Mohammed's personal contact with the Jews was closer (as well as much longer continued) before the Hijra than after it" (*ibid.*).

that the Qurʾān duly contrasts with the obstinacy of pagans.[241] Considering this dynamic, it would have made sense for the Qurʾān *not* to challenge the status of Isaac and Jacob as the exclusive heirs to the promise of Abraham—a sensitive conviction of Jews and Christians alike.[242]

While not rocking the patriarchal boat, however, the Meccan Qurʾān engages in meaningful revisionism by portraying Ishmael in a praiseworthy character and therefore eliminating the stigma of Ishmaelite descent for its Ḥiǧāzī audience. The Qurʾān's subtle balancing act is perhaps best reflected in the Middle Meccan Kor 38, 45-48, which describes Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as belonging to "the elect, the excellent" (*al-muṣṭafayn al-aḫyār*) and then proceeds to characterize Ishmael, Elisha, and Ḏū l-Kifl simply as "the excellent" (*al-aḫyār*). Without threatening the chosen status of the Israelites and their patriarchs, therefore, the Qurʾān revamps Ishmael's image. This remaking of Ishmael lays the groundwork for a non-polemical, matter-of-fact claim to Abraham in the Late Meccan sura Ibrāhīm (Kor 14, 35-41), where the patriarch prays for his Meccan progeny and thanks God for having bestowed upon him "Ishmael and Isaac" (Kor 14, 39)—a departure from the prior association of "Isaac and Jacob" with Abraham. Finally, in a Medinan context marked by tension and rivalry with the People of the Book, the sura al-Baqara mounts an assertive appropriation of Abraham for Ishmaelites that simultaneously underlines the Israelites' failings in embodying the exemplary status of their forefathers. The shifting balance of spiritual capital in favour of Ishmael's line is paralleled by the change of *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca, also a major element of the sura al-Baqara. Henceforth, Ishmael routinely joins the company of the patriarchs in the Qurʾān, standing comfortably and tellingly in the first place after Abraham (Kor 3, 84; 4, 163). The changing circumstances of nascent Islam therefore adequately explain the Qurʾān's initial reticence and eventual forthrightness about the Ishmaelite-Abrahamic ancestry of the Prophet and his followers.[243]

241 "Have you considered," the Qurʾān thus has the Prophet ask his Meccan opponents, "if it [*i.e.* the Qurʾān] is from God but you disbelieved in it while a witness from the Children of Israel bears witness to its likeness, then he has believed while you show arrogance?" (Kor 46, 10).

242 My explanation is therefore different from that of Nicolai Sinai, according to whom the profiles of Abraham and Ishmael in the Qurʾān's earliest suras suggests at the very least that their ancestral and cultic roles were not widely accepted in pre-Islamic Meccan society. Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*, p. 130.

243 The only qurʾānic account of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son, provided in the Middle Meccan the sura al-Ṣāffāt (Kor 37, 101-113), further strengthens my argument, because this account subtly implies (but does *not* expressly claim) that the intended sacrifice was Ishmael, not Isaac. However, some scholars have raised the possibility that

Was the Prophet the first of his community to champion, via the Qurʾān, the Abrahamic-Ishmaelite ancestry of Meccans? I do not believe that the absence of the names Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl from the Ḥiǧāzī onomasticon, as shown by Dagorn, suggests a positive answer to this question. For one, naming patterns tend to be conservative. As Dagorn himself demonstrates, even after Islam's emergence the names Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl only slowly rise in popularity, notwithstanding the fact that the proclamation of the Qurʾān infused Arabic discourse and literature with biblical stories and characters. Therefore, a less pervasive diffusion of biblical ideas (including the supposed Abrahamic-Ishmaelite ancestry of some Arabian tribes) may have come about in the pre-Islamic Ḥiǧāz without inducing its inhabitants to start naming their children after Abraham and Ishmael. Second, even if a historical or mythical figure is well-known to a particular community, that does not necessarily qualify her/his name for inclusion in that community's onomastic pool. For example, the host of mythical and ancient characters recorded in Firdawsī's (d. 411/1020) *Šāhnāma* (*The Book of Kings*) and frequently invoked in later Persian literature must have been familiar to educated Iranians (as well as many non-Iranians). However, in pre-modern biographical dictionaries the names of these characters appear few and far between, as the overwhelming majority of Persians bear Arabic names.[244] Just as this fact does not mean that, say, King Ǧamšīd was an obscure figure for pre-modern Iranian literati, the absence of the names Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl in pre-Islamic Ḥiǧāz does not imply that their story and ancestral status were unknown to Arabs before Islam.[245]

---

verses 112-113 are later additions to this account, in which case the original text would have had a different implication. See most recently Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung*, p. 141 ff.

244 See, for instance, the list of 315 individuals in a biographical dictionary (written *ca* 791/1389) that provides information on notables buried in the cemeteries of Šīrāz, a center of Iran's Persian heartland. Muʿīn al-Dīn Abū l-Qāsim Ǧunayd b. Maḥmūd al-Šīrāzī, *Šadd al-izār fī ḥaṭṭ al-awzār ʿan zuwwār al-mazār*, ed. Muḥammad Qazwīnī, Tehran, Čāpḫāna-yi maǧlis, 1950.

245 Indeed, based on analysis of Islamic literary sources, the following essays argue that Abraham's connection with the Meccan sanctuary goes back to the pre-Islamic period: Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and the Kaʿba"; and Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Association with the Meccan Sanctuary and the Pilgrimage in the Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods," *Muséon*, 104 (1991), p. 359-387. While Rubin considers pre-Islamic Arabs to have been familiar with their alleged Ishmaelite descent, Firestone asserts that "pre-Islamic Arabia had no knowledge of Ishmael," referring to Dagorn's study in support of this assertion. Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and the Kaʿba," p. 107; Firestone, "Abraham's Association," p. 372. However, Dagorn shows that Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl are equally unattested in the literary sources. Moreover, Dagorn notes that various forms of Ismāʿīl occur dozens of times in the

3.6 *The (Academic) Expulsion of Ishmael*

For twelve centuries, Christian and Jewish writers had taken the Ishmaelite ancestry of Arabs as a given, using it to make sense of Islam's emergence and to denigrate its adherents. With the rise of modern scholarship on the Qurʾān and early Islamic history, the Abrahamic-Ishmaelite pedigree of Arabs and the Kaʿba came under increasing scrutiny. Were these ideas known to pre-Islamic Arabs, scholars pondered, or were they promoted and created by Muḥammad? The works of Sprenger and Snouck Hurgronje argued for the latter possibility, claiming that the history of this promotion and creation is captured in the Qurʾān itself. That Muḥammad discovered and then emphasized the relation of Abraham and Ishmael to Arabs only in Medina, and that he proceeded to reinvent the two patriarchs as the founders of the Meccan sanctuary, soon turned into established scholarly wisdom.

While the hypotheses of Sprenger and Snouck Hurgronje were challenged by Torrey and Moubarac, these challenges did not dislodge the academic consensus and were countered by the extensive studies of Hayek and Dagorn.[246] The scholarly agreement over the novelty of the qurʾānic perspective vis-à-vis its pre-Islamic pagan context could only serve to highlight the significance of the Arabs' biblical genealogy to the Prophet's movement. As Snouck Hurgronje had theorized—and as subsequent scholars had concurred—the Prophet managed to "emancipate" Islam from Judaism precisely by procuring an Abrahamic pedigree for Arabs. How did this widespread recognition of the significance of Ishmaelite genealogy in the Qurʾān, which continued well into the second half of the twentieth century,[247] give way to a radically different scholarly climate exemplified in the aforementioned works of Donner, Hoyland, Neuwirth, and Webb?

I believe this tectonic shift was occasioned in part by the 1977 publication of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism*. This provocative study offered a new account of Islam's origins by discarding the data of Muslim literary sources and relying instead on early non-Muslim writings as well as documentary

epigraphic record, whereas Ibrāhīm is "practically unknown." Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismaël*, p. 107 n. 45.

246 In his review of Dagorn's monograph, the Arabist Robert Serjeant wrote that Dagorn "kills the lurking thought that there might be a native Abrahamic tradition" among the pagan communities of pre-Islamic Arabia. Robert Serjeant, "Review: *La geste d'Ismaël d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes*," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 (1982), p. 52.

247 See, for example, W. Montgomery Watt's *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 115-118; and Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran: Geschichte und Verkündigung des arabischen Propheten*, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer ("Urban-Bücher, die wissenschaftliche Taschenbuchreihe", 32), 1957, p. 108-110.

evidence. The radical methodology and conclusions of *Hagarism* sent shockwaves through the field of Islamic Studies, forcing scholars to question, reassess, abandon, or defend time-honoured assumptions. As a result, much of the subsequent research on early Islamic history has responded to *Hagarism*'s premises, claims, and conclusions as well as the sources cited therein.[248] For our purposes, it is important to note that Crone and Cook's revisionist proposal conceptualized primitive Islam as the venture of a people whose identity and religious ideology were predicated squarely on their putative descent from Hagar and Ishmael.[249] However, *Hagarism*'s genealogical focus may have inadvertently resulted in the downplaying of lineal considerations in future publications. First, considering its frequent depiction of the Prophet's followers in an unflattering light, *Hagarism*'s practice of labelling them *not* as Muslims but as "Ishmaelites" and "Hagarenes" was reminiscent of pre-modern Jewish and Christian polemical writings, which berated Arabs' descent from Sarah's slave-girl and Abraham's banished son. The polemical and pejorative associations of *Hagarism*'s invocation of Arab descent may have led other scholars to avoid a genealogical frame of reference. Second, in designating Muḥammad's followers as "Hagarenes" and "Ishmaelites," *Hagarism* was following the practice of non-Muslim (primarily Christian) sources, not indications from the Qurʾān. In fact, having rejected an early date for the compilation and canonization of the Qurʾān, Crone and Cook did not rely on the Muslim scripture as a principal source of analysis. Thus, even though they underscored the ancestral orientation of early Islam, Crone and Cook made little use of the qurʾānic data to this effect and provided no reference to the extensive scholarship surveyed in this section. Therefore, in the new era of research ushered in *Hagarism*'s wake, previous studies on qurʾānic genealogy were largely left behind.

While it would be difficult to demonstrate or quantify such major shifts in scholarship, it is instructive to contrast *Hagarism* with Fred Donner's revaluation of early Islam. Donner similarly refrains from characterizing Muḥammad's followers as "Muslims" on account of this term's meager attestation in the

248 In Fred Donner's estimation, *Hagarism* "revivified what had been a moribund subfield, and the energy created by it continues unabated even today, forty years later." Fred Donner, "The Maturing of Medieval Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies," *al-ʿUṣūr al-wusṭā*, 25 (2017), p. iii-ix, at p. vi.

249 According to Crone and Cook, the Hagarene lineage of the earliest Muslims is in fact reflected in their designation as *Magaritai* in Greek sources and *Mahgre/Mahgraye* in Syriac writings, renditions of the Arabic *muhāǧirūn* that signified not only participation in a *hiǧra* but also descent from Hagar. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 8-9.

earliest documentary and literary sources.[250] Instead of using "Ishmaelites" or "Hagarenes," however, Donner labels the earliest Muslims as "Believers"—as they are frequently designated in the Qurʾān and other early sources.[251] In Donner's account, the Prophet's followers do not emerge as an inferior ethnos swarming the civilized world, but as zealous monotheists who welcomed all and sundry within their ranks in order to spread righteousness on earth before the impending arrival of the Hour.[252]

4 Concluding Remarks

The image of Abraham as a (biological) patriarch is central to the Qurʾān's understanding of prophetic history in general and its conception of Muḥammad's mission in particular. While I hope to have established this centrality, a few qualifying statements are in order. First, it is *not* the suggestion of this paper that "Arab" as an ethnic identity had emerged prior to Islam, or that it was an influential marker of identity for the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and the adjoining areas. As an ethnic category, Arab does not appear in the Qurʾān, though this absence does not prejudice its existence in the outside world. Based on the Qurʾān, we can only claim that the Prophet and his followers considered themselves to be descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. Second, the scope of Ishmaelite descent is not entirely clear in the Qurʾān. The Prophet may have envisioned as Ishmaelites 1) all Arabians, 2) the residents of Ḥiǧāz, 3) the population of Mecca (perhaps together with Medina), or 3) only the Qurayš. That the qurʾānic Abraham speaks of having settled some of his descendants "by [God's] holy house" (Kor 14, 37) seems to favour the latter two options, but it is also possible that Mecca was seen less as an enclave and more as a launching pad for the wider dissemination of Ishmaelites. Third, we do not know if the idea of Ishmaelite descent was prevalent or entrenched in

250 An observation made already in *ibid.*, p. 8-9.

251 Donner, "From Believers to Muslims," p. 48 ff; *id., Muhammad and the Believers*, p. 57 ff. A similar proposal had been made previously by Moshe Sharon in "The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land," in *The Holy Land in History and Thought*, ed. Moshe Sharon, Leiden, Brill, 1988 ("Publications of the Eric Samson Chair in Jewish Civilization", 1), p. 225-235, esp. p. 226 ff.

252 The late Patricia Crone's last study is a remarkable testimony to the influence of Donner's account. Here, Crone claims that the Prophet "plainly had a concept of religion in the sense of a system of beliefs and laws *separate from ethnic and civic affiliation*." Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qurʾān [Part 1]," p. 230; emphasis added. Crone proceeds to add that the Prophet "never addressed his audience as Arabs, only as believers and unbelievers" (*ibid.*, p. 231).

pre-Islamic Mecca or the Ḥiǧāz. Dagorn's study does not prove that Meccans had no awareness of this idea before Islam, but equally the Qurʾān's endorsement of it does not show that it was widely acknowledged. Considering the regular contact of many Arabians with Jewish and Christian communities in the north and south of the peninsula, and the penetration of Judaism and Christianity across Arabia, it is possible that certain tribes or individuals had come to see themselves as Ishmaelites, or at least knew that others classified them as such.[253] Informed speculation is best we can do until there is clear documentary evidence from the pre-Islamic period.

Fourth, I do not contend that the Qurʾān is bent on excluding non-Abrahamic peoples from its purview. Even Genesis, solidly committed to the conception of the Israelites as the chosen people, underlines the broader ramifications of God's promise to Abraham by noting that "in [him] all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12, 3).[254] As for the Qurʾān, it suggests that the Prophet's revelations have universal significance, for example by describing them as "a reminder for the worlds" (*ḏikrun li-l-ʿālamīn; e.g.* Kor 81, 27). It is possible to bridge the Qurʾān's particularist and universalist tendencies by considering its characterization of Abraham and his righteous descendants as exemplars and leaders (*aʾimma*, sing. *imām*; Kor 2, 124; 21, 73; 28, 5; 32, 24). This characterization suggests that the extraordinary privileges of Abraham's descendants are expected to have wider reach and inspire the pursuit of righteousness by other peoples. Perhaps the same expectation stands behind the Qurʾān's criticism of the People of the Book for guarding their scriptural knowledge instead of

253 There are some tantalizing statements to this effect in the works of Sozomen of Bethelia (d. *ca* 447) and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393-466). In particular, Theodoret claims that certain "barbarian" inhabitants of the Syrian desert "boast of Ishmael as their ancestor." Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, transl. Richard M. Price, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cistercian Publications ("Cistercian Studies Series", 88), 1985, p. 64. The statement of Theodoret, and the pertinent remarks of Sozomen, are discussed extensively in the erudite (if somewhat optimistic) work of Irfan Shahîd, namely, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 1989, p. 148-180. However, even if Theodoret's claim is accurate (and non-sarcastic), it would be difficult to establish a link between the "Ishmaelism" of such communities from the Syrian desert and the self-image of seventh-century Ḥiǧāzīs. I am grateful to Khalil Andani for drawing my attention to this pertinent section of the late Irfan Shahîd's work.

254 In the eloquent words of Jon D. Levenson, "The chosen people does not withdraw from the human family, but exercises a special office within it, an office defined by the character and will of their universal God. They are the particular witnesses—and beneficiaries—of universalism." Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett, Leiden-New York, Brill ("Biblical Interpretation Series", 19), 1996, p. 143-169, at p. 155.

sharing it with others (Kor 3, 187; 6, 91). Even if we attribute a "universal horizon" to the Qurʾān's Abrahamic exceptionalism, however, this does not necessarily imply that everyone could be a full member of the Muslim community—with its characteristic cultic, ritual, and legal correlates—regardless of their genealogical background.[255]

Against my emphasis on the importance of Ishmaelite genealogy, it might be objected that the Qurʾān never applies lineal designations to the Prophet's followers. For instance, while it repeatedly uses *banū Isrāʾīl* for historical and contemporary groups of Jews and Christians, the Qurʾān does not describe the earliest Muslims as *banū Ismāʿīl* or point out their Abrahamic-Ishmaelite descent more than a few times (in the mentioned passages of al-Baqara, Ibrāhīm, and al-Ḥaǧǧ). The answer to this objection is that the Qurʾān's naming pattern may reflect the self-designations of these communities. In utilizing the label *banū Isrāʾīl*, the Qurʾān mirrors the self-identification of contemporary Jewish (and even Christian) communities as the people of Israel. There is no reason to believe, however, that the inhabitants of the Ḥiǧāz labelled themselves routinely as Ishmaelites, even if they had come to accept their supposed biblical genealogy.

Of course, the self-conception of Jews and Christians as Israel is itself a product of biblical discourse, with its explicit and pervasive use of genealogy in historical, theological, and legal contexts. However, it would be misplaced to expect a similar discourse in the Qurʾān, because the Bible and the Qurʾān address vastly different social contexts. The "land of Israel" was the meeting place of three continents and therefore characterized by considerable ethnic diversity. It had previously been "the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (Gen 15, 19), who continued to live alongside the Israelites even after the conquest (Judges 1, 21-2, 3). Exile and captivity had further increased the Israelites' awareness of, and interactions with, other communities. Embedded in a smorgasbord of nations, biblical authors attempted to show the exceptional status of a specific people by establishing the superiority of its God and way of life over those of others. Notwithstanding repeated calamities, the Bible assured the Israelites, they were the main protagonists of human history, attached by an unbreakable covenant to the Lord. The Qurʾān, by contrast, addresses a far more homogenous Ḥiǧāzī context, an Ishmaelite bubble much less exposed to the presence

255 I am borrowing the phrase "universal horizon" from the title of Jon D. Levenson's essay, cited in the previous note.

of foreign nations. In the qurʾānic milieu, the defining social line ran through the same people, partitioning them into believers and unbelievers. With differentiation and hostility being a family affair, there would be no point to dwell on shared tribal or biblical affiliations. After all, the name of the Prophet's own tribe, Qurayš, appears only once in the Qurʾān (Kor 106, 1).

The Ishmaelite background of the earliest Muslims was thus worthy of note mainly in their interactions with the Israelites, and this is where the Qurʾān's implicit and explicit remaking of Ishmael finds particular significance. However, genealogy does not perform the same function in the Qurʾān as it does in the Bible. For one, the Bible has to prove the exceptional character of the Israelites and their patriarchs, but the Qurʾān takes the election of Abraham and Israel for granted. For another, the Qurʾān has a far less nationalistic conception of history. It does not seek to present the Ishmaelites as the main heroes of history, as the Lord's special possession among all nations, or as God's eternal covenantal partners. Rather, the Qurʾān has the more modest goal of broadening the remit of divine election to include all of Abraham's children—descendants of Ishmael as well as those of Isaac and Jacob. Finally, preoccupied with God's omnipotence, the Qurʾān depicts His covenantal arrangements as essentially transactional. Muḥammad's followers are fortunate to enjoy the gifts of sanctuary and comprehensive scripture, but their Abrahamic privileges will be taken away swiftly should they prove unworthy of God's favours.

The Qurʾān depicts Abraham not only as a religious forerunner to the Prophet and his followers but also as their genealogical forefather, portraying these spiritual and physical aspects as inextricably connected. It is precisely because of their descent from Abraham that Muḥammad's community can inherit the exemplary religiosity of the patriarch. It is thanks to their status as Abraham's children that they are endowed with the Meccan sanctuary and blessed with prophecy and scripture. While the Qurʾān's gaze is fixated on Abraham, the coveted ancestry of early Muslims hinged on Ishmael. Thus, although Jews and Christians had marginalized and vilified Ishmael in light of their attachment to Isaac, the Qurʾān attempts a restoration of Abraham's firstborn son. Embedding Ishmael in various lists of righteous individuals, the Qurʾān describes him as one of God's "excellent" (*al-aḫyār*; Kor 38, 48) and "patient" (*al-ṣābirīn*; Kor 21, 85) servants, as "true to the promise" (*ṣādiq al-waʿd*), and most importantly as "a messenger" and "a prophet" (*rasūlan nabiyyan*; Kor 19, 54). Ishmael also shares the qurʾānic limelight with his father in the sura al-Baqara, which describes the two men as co-founders of the Kaʿba and relates their prayer for their descendants (Kor 2, 128). A following verse as well as two other Medinan suras refer to the patriarchal generation by placing Ishmael between Abraham on the one hand and Isaac and Jacob on the other

(Kor 2, 136; 3, 84; 4, 163). This onomastic arrangement is highly significant. A Rabbinic tradition had likened Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the three strands that form a strong rope of genealogical attachment for the Israelites.[256] By inserting Ishmael immediately after Abraham, the Qurʾān effectively rethreads this rope in the interest of a more inclusive patriarchal vision, one in which the forebear of Muslims finds his rightful place among the ancestors of the Israelites.

256 *Sifre* to Deuteronomy (*pisqa* 312).